

Hawkins, 2000 by edgy_fluffball

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: M/M

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Carol (Stranger Things), Claudia Henderson, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington's Parents, Tommy H. (Stranger Things), Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Minor or Background Relationship(s)

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-02-09

Updated: 2018-03-02

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:16:07

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 7

Words: 22,975

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Steve hasn't been back in Hawkins ever since that fateful night ten years ago. He doesn't want to, thank you very much. That is until Dustin forces him to return for his High School Reunion. For Steve it is an exposure therapy with anything he had tried to forget. The memories linger behind every corner.

1. A Persuasive Doctorate

Author's Note:

Harringrove has me coaxed into writing multi chapter again for the first time in very long. I hope this is readable.

The call woke him up. A quick glance onto his alarm clock let him groan out in annoyance as he padded through his bed room to the telephone.

‘What in the name of sanity would be a good reason for you to wake me up at three-twenty in the fucking morning, dickhead?’ Steve growled and leaned against the wall next to the phone.

‘Well, Mike called me because Nancy told him that Jonathan got involved with the organisation of a High School Reunion. I called Lucas and he is on board – we are going to have a get-together in June in Hawkins,’ Dustin sounded too excited for the early hour, his voice vibrating with glee, ‘what do you say?’

‘What do you think I’ll say? You can come visit me at any time, buddy, just don’t talk about going to Hawkins.’

Steve sat down at the kitchen desk and started to doodle on the notepad he kept close to the phone for these cases. He concentrated better when doodling. Most of the time he drew the things he had left behind, and threw a few skyscrapers in for good measure.

‘You can’t just hide in New York forever,’ Dustin sounded pressing, like he had a reason behind asking.

Steve rolled his eyes and raked his fingers through the bird nest his hair piled up to. He thought about how he could have slept through the night, if it hadn’t been for Dustin and his immature ideas. Clearing his throat, he switched the hand holding the phone.

‘I didn’t even know about the reunion, Dustin, if there were invitations I would get one at some point. But I haven’t, and I don’t

plan to go back anytime soon,' Steve got up from the table, feeling more and more agitated, 'I have my reasons, and I will not, I will not, never –'

'Steve, Steve, calm down, you're hyperventilating again, and you're being unreasonable. You know Hawkins, and it's been ten years.'

'Yes, yes, I know Dustin,' he could feel his hands starting to shake and his eyelid beginning to twitch, 'but I'll not go back to Hawkins, no matter what you do or say to change my mind!'

'We'll see,' Dustin sounded too confident for Steve's liking, 'I'll get back to my studying now.'

'You study at half past three in the morning? What is wrong with you?'

'I couldn't sleep. And ever since Mike called me, I just wanted to tell you. I got excited, I guess. Was actually looking forward to all of us getting together again, so thanks.'

'You visit me all the time,' Steve knew he sounded childish.

'Yes, I do. But what about Max and Lucas? What about Will?'

'Bye Dustin. See you soon. Tell the others I wish them a happy new year.'

Dustin's 'It's almost February,' was the last thing he heard before he hung up and went back to bed, even though he wasn't likely to fall asleep again.

Dustin had planted the seed, both of them knew that. It wasn't often that he tried the pity-thing, mentioned the other party-members, or even told him about what they were up to. It was their own pact that had started out as an understanding of each other's reasons for what they were doing. Dustin had left Hawkins to go to Harvard, where he had come as far as doing his doctorate. Steve had left Hawkins to get away. Living in New York had helped him clear his head and start new. Dustin returned to Hawkins for birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and whenever he could afford to go on a weekend. Steve hadn't been to Hawkins in ten years. Dustin tried to find the ultimate

argument to persuade him to join him on one of his tours. Steve tried to deflect them all.

Dustin never gave up.

He called weekly, telling him whatever was new. It posed a first amongst all the times he called him. Usually, he told him far he had come with his doctoral dissertation, now it was about Max and Lucas closing their restaurant for a week to come to Hawkins in time for Steve's High School reunion, about Mike and Jane taking a few days off and Will being excited for all of them coming together.

At one point, Steve asked, 'Did you even tell them I won't be there?'

The answer hitting him over the air was enough to huff out in annoyance. Dustin still knew him like no one else ever had. Steve sucked in a breath, massaging his temples and, at some point, resining.

'Tell me when your train arrives. I'll be there with the car and we can drive over together. It's gonna be a roadtrip!'

'Cut the sarcastic tone, Steven, it hasn't worked on me since you started babysitting us.'

'I'll never let you forget how you forced me to do this by putting my credibility on the line. And now I'm gonna hang up, I need to reschedule my annual leave. Bye, shithead.'

Just like that Steve found himself driving back to Indiana, Dustin in the passenger seat, and enough food and sweets for a week in the back. He hadn't driven outside of the city in years, probably ten as well. Driving on the highway with someone was a change, welcome only to a point. Dustin hadn't changed too much in the fifteen years since he had gotten into Steve's car for the first time.

'Dude, you need to update your taste in music! That's all at least ten years old. You didn't listen to that when you left Hawkins,' Dustin leaned forward and opened the glove compartment to look through the tapes in there, 'and this is added to the fact that you still drive

the fucking Beemer!’

‘Really, Dustin? Insulting the vehicle that gets you around today? Do you really think that’s the best way of thanking me right now?’

‘I’m just saying that your music is not what I thought you were listening to.’

‘What, it reminds me of good times,’ Steve tried not to look to the side and meet Dustin’s wary glances, ‘good times and the experiences it is tied to.’

‘You’re listening to the damn Scorpions, Steve,’ Dustin shouted out as he got hold of the tape, ‘Why would you do that?’

‘Hey – you’re still praising punk rock!’

‘And what’s wrong with that?’ Dustin raised his eyebrows and grabbed a bag of chocolate bars.

‘You are a doctorate at fucking Harvard! Do you really want to tell me that you listen to punk rock in your – do you have an office?’

‘Uhm, yes? I also have to teach and mark papers, which I told you a year ago when you asked for the first time.’

Steve nodded along and looked back out onto the road, ‘Still, do you listen to your punk stuff while marking?’

‘Sure I do,’ Dustin grinned and showed his teeth, ‘I also get chocolate as a present often. The students know me pretty well.’

‘Three Musketeers?’

‘You know it,’ Dustin handed him a bar, ‘most of our provisions are alms from the students of the new bionics course I’m teaching. There are even a few girls.’

Steve grinned, drumming on the steering wheel. His favourite tape played, he had a chocolate bar and Dustin’s Harvard stories were surprisingly entertaining. When his tape finished, Dustin got one out of his bag. They spent the next hour with his punk rock recordings

blaring in the car.

‘You know what’s funny?’ Dustin broke the silence between them, rummaged through his bag again, seemingly looking for something and pulled a notebook from the depths of the messenger bag, ‘Your Beemer is ancient by now, and it still runs like a new car.’

‘Funny? A lot of work, more likely,’ Steve pulled over onto a too familiar road, ‘I have replaced almost everything at least once, spent a lot of money and finally learned every secret she had.’

‘Wait, you’re not saying you learned how to work on your own car?’

‘Work on my car? I can fucking fix her,’ Steve threw him a dark glare, ‘Don’t look so doubting, I had ten years to get to know every single screw holding her together. There is a reason she’s still on her wheels, and that is me. Now give me another chocolate bar, I am going to need it.’

Dustin hurried to comply, bending his upper body forward to reach the bottom of his bag. His curly head hit the dashboard as he came back up, a Mars bar in his hand.

‘I just realized that you are one of those people who haven’t yet arrived in the new millennium. You have started to listen to old music and hold on to your antiquity of a car to keep memorabilia of a time long gone. Next you’ll start looking at your yearbook, revelling in the good ol’ times when you still were someone.’

‘Thank you Dustin, there’s nothing like a friend to remind you that your well-paid job and live in the city aren’t worth shit in the end,’ Steve rolled his eyes, ‘we’re almost in Hawkins, by the way. You’re welcome, I still hate you.’

Dustin leaned against the window to spot the ‘Welcome to Hawkins’ sign next to the road. His legs bopped up and down, and his fingers raked through his hair.

‘Mom is expecting us tonight, tomorrow we will meet with the rest of the guys, and then of course there is the actual High School reunion. Are you okay with seeing all of the dickheads out of your and

Nancy's years again?'

Steve felt like slamming on the brakes, 'You didn't think of telling me that earlier? Dickhead! Is there a reason for you letting me walk right into a trap?'

Dustin stared at him, eyes filled with surprise and bewilderment, 'I thought you got along with Nancy and Jonathan? Oh god, Steve, please tell me you had some kind of contact with them, tell me you didn't argue about the whole relationship mess, I thought you left that behind you!'

'Idiot,' Steve pulled into the Henderson's driveway, 'Nancy and I are fine, there's nothing left that could ruin our friendship.'

'Except maybe ten years absence?' Dustin got out of the car and stretched.

Steve had nothing but a forced smile to offer while getting the bags from the trunk. After twelve hours in the car he felt drained and empty, his bag pressed into his bag and Dustin looked too smug for someone he still called kid, despite being a doctorate at Harvard.

'Dusty!'

Mrs. Henderson had apparently waited for them next to the window. She opened the front door and hurried towards them with open arms. Her flowered dressing gown fluttered after her. Dustin started to grin from ear to ear, setting his bag down to hug her the moment she reached them.

'Oh my big, grown up son, look at you! Every time I see you, you seem to have grown a bit more,' she started to pull Dustin towards the house.

Steve grinned and followed. Mrs. Henderson would never change, he thought. Hawkins would never change, driving through the streets to the Henderson's had reminded him of that. The houses along the streets he still knew like the back of his hand had not changed and he presumed that the same families lived in the same houses.

He entered the house he had spent so many afternoons at. He had sat

on the couch, reading for his tests and exams, tried to cook in the kitchen, and sunbathed in the backyard while Dustin and his friends ran through the garden, hunting Tews, the incredible space monster. Back then he had studied for his degree, before starting in his father's company, before moving to New York, before cutting all the ties. He set down the bags next to the couch.

'Now Steve, let me look at you,' Mrs. Henderson came towards him, her face looking unusually stern, 'what happened to you? You look like a ghost, perfectly skeletal! Aren't you eating, you look malnourished? Can't you afford the food in New York? Oh, let me warm something up for you!'

She dragged him into the kitchen and dove into the fridge for something edible. Steve stood in the door frame, not knowing what to do with his hands. Dustin grinned at him, he could see his white teeth sparkle. His face was filled beaming with the satisfaction of having brought Steve back to Hawkins and his mother announcing that she would pamper them both. Within ten minutes, Mrs. Henderson had heated up a pot of pasta for them and laid the table.

'Now, Steve, you sit down here and eat the whole plateful. I'm watching every bite you take, young man! Goodness, you are thirty-four and still can't take care of you? Now eat, eat – you too, Dusty!'

Steve knew out of experience that talking back would not help the least. Just eating and listening to her rambling was okay. It occupied Mrs. Henderson and gave her the opportunity to get off her chest whatever bothered her before Steve and Dustin called it a night. The setup had been clear from the beginning: Steve would take the couch while Dustin slept in his old room. He had fallen asleep on the sofa back then as well, when Mrs. Henderson came home later than anticipated.

'Steve, dear, tell me – how long since you last were here?' Mrs. Henderson poured him a glass of juice.

'Ten years,' Steve took it with a small smile

'Ten years? Oh sweetie, Hawkins must look like a strange place to you!'

He ignored the snort Dustin let out, took a sip of the juice, and dug into his pasta, 'It hasn't changed much really. I have only seen a few streets in the dark but I doubt this place will ever surprise me.'

'Well, it's still Hawkins, of course. It's no big town, nothing special,' Mrs. Henderson ruffled Dustin's hair, 'but it's still the place all of you grew up in, isn't it, Dusty?'

Dustin looked up from his plate and presented his mother a toothy grin before getting back to eating. She wasn't yet convinced to just let them eat, however, Steve felt an unwanted tension grab hold of him as she reached over the table to grab his arm.

'I just want you to know that you can always come to me if you need to talk about anything, Steve, I mean, you know, don't you?'

He nodded, his mouth full to the brim. The small acknowledgement of her concerns seemed to be enough for Mrs. Henderson. She got up and yawned.

'It's been a long day for us all, you should get a good night's sleep tonight. And Steve – thank you for giving Dusty a lift.'

They went to bed way past midnight. Steve lay on the couch, bundled up in the blankets Mrs. Henderson had handed him to make himself comfortable. He had heard the door to Dustin's room slide open and close, his careful steps over the hallway towards the bathroom, and his way back. He tried to close his eyes, sleep, rest and prepare for the coming days in Hawkins.

2. Dining With Friends

The cat woke him up. Fews jumped onto his stomach and curled up on top of his blanket.

‘Morning, monster’, Steve patted her and sighed.

The sun shone through the window onto the couch he still lay on. One of his legs dangled to the ground, wrapped in a blanket. He could only imagine the state of his hair but couldn’t care less. Fews still purred into his chest, clawing lazily at his shirt.

‘Ouch, Fews, can you stop that please? You can still stay there, just pull in the claws,’ he hummed quietly, stroking her soft fur and melting into the sofa’s form, ‘yes, that’s better, good girl. Do you enjoy that? Do you like my belly rubs? Yes, Fews, I know I give good ones – do you think I should give some to Dustin? Do you think that it would make him forget about the stuff he wants me to do while I’m here?’

‘Please do not give me belly rubs.’

Steve grinned up to where Dustin leaned in the door frame, looking down on him with a shock in his eyes that filled him with a sudden joy. Dustin’s hardly hidden disgust was the best thing about his morning, and it hadn’t even started completely.

‘Morning dickhead,’ he said with the widest smile he could muster, ‘don’t worry, Fews keeps me occupied to the fullest. She is the only girl that matters.’

‘Sweettalker! Breakfast is about ready. But for real, man, put a shirt on. I don’t want my Mum fainting in the kitchen because you show too much skin.’

Steve groaned, lifted Fews off his chest and set her down before grabbing his jumper from the arm rest and pulling it over his head. He followed Dustin on bare feet, yawning because the long drive still took its toll.

‘Oh sweetie, here you go, a nice warm cup of coffee to get you started,’ Mrs. Henderson pressed a hot cup into his hand and motioned towards the table, sit down and eat something, who knows when you’ll get something the next time, hm?’

‘Tonight, Mum,’ Dustin interrupted, ‘we meet all the other’s tonight at the diner.’

‘Did you arrange for that, Dusty?’

‘Yes, Mum. I can operate a telephone, pick it up and call my friends. I’ll just drag Steve along if he resists. Will you resist?’ he turned his head to look at Steve.

‘Do I have another option?’ Steve buttered a piece of toast and slid onto the kitchen bench.

‘Would you look at this,’ Mrs. Henderson smiled softly, her eyes watering dangerously, ‘my two beautiful boys, sitting here –‘

‘– having breakfast, Mum,’ Dustin sighed.

‘Who would’ve thought I would have you here at this age still, I mean – thirty-four and twenty-eight! And my little Dusty at Harvard, Steve in New York City. You wouldn’t believe how proud I am, of both of you, of course. Oh Steve, don’t you think it might be a good idea if you came over to Hawkins more regularly. You would always find a roof over your head and people to feed you.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Henderson, but –‘

‘How often, Steven?’

‘I’m sorry, Claudia, but I don’t think I will. This reunion is pretty much the only exception to the rule,’ Steve finished his coffee and smiled, eyelid starting to twitch again.

Mrs. Henderson sighed, but didn’t say a thing in response. Steve was almost convinced it had to do with Dustin motioning something in her general direction behind his back.

‘So what do you guys have planned for today?’

Dustin started to elaborate on different options they had, as far as Steve followed the conversation. He got another cup of coffee and looked out of the kitchen window. The sun shone down on the earth cellar just outside. He still heard the metal doors slam shut after all the years.

‘Come on, Steve, we should get going,’ Dustin pushed his chair back and got up.

He pulled a cap over his curls and his leather jacket on. Steve followed him with an apologetic glance sideways. Fewer followed him as he stepped into his shoes.

‘Are you sure about the jacket, it’s June!’

Dustin rolled his eyes at him, ‘I’m almost thirty, I can pick my own clothes.’

‘I’m almost thirty-five and I still struggle to pick the right coat just by judging the brightness outside.’

‘Yah, that’s because you’re Steve. You are the walking mess,’ Dustin grinned, ‘now come on, they expect us!’

‘You said tonight,’ Steve yelled after Dustin, ‘what about tonight?’

Mrs. Henderson waved after them, standing in the door with a dish towel in the other hand, as Steve jumped into his car. He turned onto the road, driving towards the town centre.

‘We’re we headed?’ he glanced to the side where Dustin lounged back in his seat, ‘You need to tell me, Dustin, I don’t know what you planned with the party. Good-for-nothing dipshit!’

‘No need to insult people,’ Dustin sighed and returned his attention to the road, ‘go to *Benny’s*.’

‘But that place closed –’

‘Reopened under new ownership. It’s really good, Mum and me go there whenever I’m home. It’s no longer just a burger joint, they serve a whole range of cool foods now.’

'No locals then,' Steve set the turning signal.

'Hey, do you think we could pick some people up?'

'Dustin!'

'Just Joyce and her boyfriend. Will has to work until later and Jonathan and Nancy have to get to the joint from the school.'

'It's not graduation today, is it?' Steve took another turn, 'And did you say boyfriend?'

'Uhm, yes it is. Down Grant, Steve, don't you remember the proper way to get to the Byers?'

They drove down the road, past Mirkwood, that godforsaken shortcut, and towards the dirt track that led up to the secluded property. There was only one car in the front, a police jeep that Steve knew too well.

'Do you by any chance mean Hop when you say boyfriend? Oh please tell me they got their act together!'

'They did,' Dustin smiled carefully, 'they grew closer after they had to sort out the whole mess. They became a unit after that, then Lonnie came back to harass Jonathan into leaving Hawkins because he had talked about NYU fifteen years ago. Hopper decked him.'

'Of course he did. Does he know we pick them up?'

'He asked me to, Steve. When will you finally understand that all of us still stand behind you? You can try whatever you want, in the end you will have to accept that one of us is taking an interest in you.'

Steve stopped the car, 'Go on then, get them. I'll wait here for you.'

Dustin walked up to the door, knocked and took a step back, waiting. He could see him sway on his feet from the car, Steve wondered for a brief moment if he was nervous. Then he realized that he projected his own worries. He had to force himself to steady his breathing. His knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel too tight by the time Hopper and Joyce came towards the car.

Steve felt both hot and cold. He had managed to ignore that Hopper was going on sixty. The police chief still looked on the verge of being fit, but his hair was greyer and a bit thinner than Steve remembered. He held Joyce's hand in his and looked out onto the car with a frown. Dustin, now a few steps ahead, seemed to talk nonstop.

Ere Steve knew, he had gotten out of the car, closed the distance between them, and lunged himself at Joyce to hug her. He felt her arms close around his shoulders, one hand patting at his hair whilst holding him close.

'Hello kid,' Hopper nodded, 'good to have you back.'

'Hop,' Steve fought the urge to bury his face in the crook of his neck and breathe in, 'good to see you, too. God, I really missed you guys apparently.'

Joyce stroked his hair, holding him back at an arm's length, and studying his face, 'You look well, a grown man. Oh, what am I talking about, you look amazing, sweetie!'

Steve allowed himself to feel home for a moment, because whatever he had tried to erase from his mind over ten long years didn't hold back anymore. Joyce felt warm and soft, her softly shaking hands tracing his face reminded him of late nights spent worrying over each other and so many more. It was a sentiment that felt oddly familiar and strange at the same time.

'Okay, hugs and kisses, we know the drill. Can we go now? There are more people than just you two who haven't seen Steve in ages,' Dustin looked incredibly pleased with himself when Steve swatted at him to get him back into the car.

Joyce refused to let go of his hand, which lead to Hopper squeezing into the backseat with Dustin because Steve still drove. He could hear them discuss a matter of utmost importance that no one else should hear about – which meant that both Joyce and Steve tried their best to converse about anything else with raised voices, drowning out their secret council.

'Who reopened Benny's?' Steve turned back onto the main road,

glancing at Joyce.

‘Nice couple. They moved there. He is a chef, she is a great manager – it works, and Hawkins has a new place for people to hang out at. I hear the boys get together whenever all of them are in time. Nancy and Jonathan go there after school, have coffee before they go home and...live their lives, I guess.’

‘They aren’t married yet?’ Steve surprised himself how un-scary the mere thought was to him.

‘No, you would have been the first one to get invited. Although – I think Jonathan might have an idea. About the upcoming future. I didn’t tell you anything, if it comes up.’

‘Of course not, Joyce,’ Steve turned into the parking lot in front of the diner that had been *Benny’s Burgers*. The new board above the entrance announced that *Nova’s Food Corner* sold the best food for miles. Steve looked around curiously. Whatever had happened to the place, he liked it. The seats in the cosy booths in front of dark wooden walls were coated with red leather, making it seem like diner furniture had been moved into a restaurant.

‘How does it work?’ Steve shook his head and followed Dustin towards the biggest booth in the back, ‘This shouldn’t work, especially not in Hawkins. A place this innovative seems more likely somewhere in California or NYC –’

‘Hey guys! Oh my God, you really got Steve to come – I thought you were joking or just unshakably optimistic!’

Steve felt himself being pulled into a bone crushing hug, executed by a young girl. It took him a moment to recognize her, but in the end, her ginger hair gave her away.

‘Hi Max, it’s great to see you again. How are you? You have to tell me everything, okay?’ he hugged her back, grinning at the energetic flick of her hair that seemingly hadn’t changed ever since she graduated.

‘To be honest, I am surprised. We didn’t expect Dustin to succeed,

you had just been gone for too long – which makes it all the better that you really are here!’

They sat down in the booth where Lucas waited for them, high-fiving Dustin before patting Steve on the back, ‘Man, to see you back here is really something. The likelihood was down to one-digit numbers, when he called saying that you would actually come back we felt like having a party!’

The door opened again, Steve turned around and felt the smile creep over his face. The newcomers were dressed too nice to have just come in to join them. The first young man was lanky, tall enough to almost hit the door frame. He looked a bit sour, like someone who had been forced to wear a suit all morning without feeling comfortable. There was a woman following him who was frantically looking for something in her handbag. Steve smiled to himself. He would still recognize her anyway. Jonathan followed after Nancy, talking to another young woman, Steve didn’t even want to think about who it was.

‘Steve! You really are here,’ Jane pushed past Nancy and Mike, who was left to stare after her as she crossed the room with a few steps before throwing herself at Steve, ‘I had to promise the guys not to check in on you. It nearly killed me.’

‘You seem pretty alive to me,’ Steve joked and held her at an arm’s length, ‘You look perfectly radiant. Good for you!’

Jane rolled her eyes and showed him her blinding smile before joining Hopper and Joyce in the booth. Mike joined her after a quick hug for Steve. The last ones to greet him were Nancy and Jonathan, both dressed sharp enough to make an impression.

‘Well, aren’t you looking good,’ Steve grinned at Nancy, ‘honestly, did you age at all? You still look no day older than –’

‘Don’t over-do it,’ she interrupted him quickly.

‘- twenty. Hey, that is reasonable!’

‘You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington!’

They sat down just as a waitress came over to them to take their orders. It seemed like all the others had established their personal favourites already, Steve went with what Dustin was having before leaning back and looking around.

‘I have to say, I missed this.’

‘You could have had it at any time. Only thing keeping you from it –’ Lucas interrupted him, most likely because Max’s foot had hit him in the shin.

Steve cleared his throat and examined the centrepiece on the table closer, ‘So – graduation day?’

‘Yes, finally,’ Jonathan smiled and nodded, ‘Nance and I could tell everybody just wanted to leave.’

‘It was Holly’s graduation as well, so Mike and Jane had to join,’ Nancy explained, mentioning something that had Steve’s jaw hit the floor.

‘Holly?’

‘She’s clever,’ Mike chipped in, ‘I know, she wasn’t even ten when you left, but she wanted no big party anyway and allowed us to come here for lunch, and maybe dinner. Depends on how long she can stand Mum and Dad on her own.’

‘Wow, little Holly graduating would be the last thing I thought about,’ Steve scratched the back of his head, ‘I have missed pretty much everything, haven’t I?’

His dinner companions exchanged knowing looks. Dustin put a hand on Steve’s forearm, prompting him to look at him.

‘You know about me. A doctorate attempting to compile every science into one research field because I couldn’t decide which one to focus on,’ he sounded serious, his lisp hardly audible, ‘and you know we’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Ask away, ten years are a long time and there are a few things that changed.’

‘Nancy and Jonathan haven’t come to see us in a few weeks because

of the preparations for the reunion,' Mike began, 'they are just here because it's you.'

'That's not true,' Nancy nudged her brother in the side, 'Mike and El have been discussing having children.'

Someone spluttered their drink. Steve looked around and couldn't hide a grin.

'Well, judging from Hop's horrified look I wasn't the only one who didn't know,' he leaned back, 'you telling each other's secrets is actually entertaining. So what is there to say about Max and Lucas? What has been going on in California?'

'We've opened a restaurant,' Max took Lucas' hand and looked at him, 'we are doing good business, and sometimes we can take a few days off because we have staff to take care of everything.'

'Just like this week,' Lucas completed, 'it works perfectly.'

'What did I miss, has Steve really shown up or has Dustin sent us on a wild goose hunt?'

Steve looked up just to blink at the young man leaning down between Joyce and Hopper. His dark eyes glinted, he looked healthier and happier than Steve had ever seen him.

'Will?' he asked and got up to hug him close, 'how are you? What are you up to these days?'

'I'm a nurse, that's why I'm late – shifts.'

'Don't believe him,' Mike interrupted, 'we might not have found out who his mystery girlfriend is, but there is someone! Definitely, and we are going to find out. The party is together for a whole week, that is enough time for us to accomplish anything!'

'Guys, I don't –'

'Don't deny it,' Dustin slammed his fist on the table, 'there is something an we'll find it out.'

‘Max –‘ Will looked to her, maybe to find help, but Max just grinned and shrugged.

‘So, what about you? Are you happy in New York?’ Nancy had everyone’s attention back on Steve with her question.

‘Yes, is it like on *Friends*?’ Max leant forward, a sparkle in her eyes.

‘Of course it is,’ Steve deadpanned, ‘Except more realistic. I work long hours without having a lot of people around. My father would be proud of the way I retreat in my office without showing my face to even my co-workers.’

He laughed it off, took a sip of his drink and leaned back. There were still a few eyes on him, Hopper frowned so dark that he half expected a deep-cutting question next. Joyce, next to him, seemed worried as well, and at least three of the kids were whispering to each other. He caught Dustin’s eyes who tried an uplifting smile, but had to fail. Steve could imagine what they all thought, it was a topic they should avoid if they wanted to continue to have a pleasant conversation, he knew it and there was no way the others didn’t.

It was the arrival of their food that allowed them to start on different conversations. Dustin had told him what the others were doing whenever he visited him in New York, but hearing about shiftwork from Will, troubled kids coming in for help in Indianapolis from Jane and the time a co-worker had almost electrocuted himself from Mike made him feel like he was part of the group again.

Nancy and Jonathan told him about everything that had changed around the school, including the new gym, ‘Now we have PVC floor. They chugged out the old wooden floor coating and renovated it completely.’

‘There are plans to have a reunion tournament,’ Jonathan reached out to get the salt shaker from the middle of the table, ‘wouldn’t you be interested in joining in?’

‘I haven’t played basketball in fifteen years, I wouldn’t be able –‘

‘Neither have your teammates,’ Nancy smiled at him and took his

hand over the table, 'you wouldn't believe what some of them look like today. Most of them are still here and I see them down at the shop almost every other day. You aged well, they didn't.'

'Thank you,' Steve frowned, 'I try.'

'They have a gym in the office,' Dustin chipped in, 'Steve is there all the time, I bet.'

'It was a mistake to allow you to come to work with me that one day, right?'

Dustin huffed and crossed his arms, 'You said it was boring anyway because no one cares about what you do. I was only reasonable in helping you out one day to keep you from dying of boredom.'

'Yes, sure you did,' Steve could still feel Hoppers judging gaze burning into the side of his neck.

Joyce ordered them all ice cream for desert, proving the thesis that some things would never change, no matter how old they got. Their eyes lit up when the cups were carried over towards them, everyone got a colourful array of flavours set in front of them. Steve looked round as the others started to dig in. He couldn't bring himself to see anything but the six kids he had driven around so many times he couldn't tell how often exactly.

What had started out with him being hijacked by Dustin, had turned into a taxi service for whoever's mother couldn't take them where they needed to be. He had driven Dustin around to his friends' houses whenever Mrs. Henderson didn't feel comfortable with her Dusty cycling through the night, he had taken Mike to Hopper's cabin for him to visit Jane, and he had taken on the taxi duty for Will as well once Jonathan stayed at the Wheeler's with Nancy. Even Max had been in need of his service a few times in order to get home on time when she had snuck out without her brother noticing.

He had experienced all sorts of trouble in his old Beemer, including Mike's insecurity about his relationship with Jane, Lucas' ever-growing crush on Max, and Dustin's fear of ending up alone. It had him kept involved in their lives, even when there were no monsters

to hunt.

It all had turned sour.

‘Ten years are a hell of a time,’ Hopper stared at him and for a moment Steve thought he might know, ‘we shouldn’t overwhelm you with what has been going on here, we have a whole week, after all!’

Steve felt his shoulders relax again, the voice in his head calmed down again. Of course Hopper didn’t know, none of them did.

‘Ten years,’ he said instead, willing his voice to remain calm, ‘it seems crazy once you think about it.’

‘Especially since you didn’t tell anyone why you left,’ Hopper leaned in, just slightly, but it was enough for Joyce to grab his arm.

‘I think we all know why Steve left and needed a break from Hawkins.’

3. All the Way Around

They stayed up late. Dustin invited Steve to play some computer games whilst Mrs. Henderson watched her TV evening programme. Fewes kept them company, purring in Steve's lap, only moving when he lost and got worked up about it.

Dustin seemed agitated even after winning six times in a row. He had knitted his eyebrows together and threw sideways-glances at Steve whenever he did as much as clearing his throat.

'Steve?'

'Yes?'

'What exactly happened ten years ago? I just know what all the others know, and it doesn't make sense. There must have been something else – so what happened?'

The silence between them hurt. Steve tried to concentrate on the video game, failing to ignore Dustin's determined look.

'I made a mistake ten years ago, and it still haunts me. That's all, okay?' he listened closely, but the TV noise from the living room seemed to have ended, 'I should go to bed.'

'Sure,' Dustin yawned, 'just don't think I'll let it go.'

Steve ruffled his hair and left Dustin's old bedroom to retire to his couch. He curled up and tried to force himself to fall asleep. Coming back to Hawkins had borne the risk of bringing everything to light, Hopper seemed suspicious to say the least, and Dustin didn't call himself the party's grey matter for no reason.

He fell asleep after lying awake for a few more hours. It was no dreamless, quiet sleep. Instead, he woke up three times in cold sweat, and had to try and find a more comfortable position on the sweat-soaked sheet to go back to sleep. His dreams never changed and still, he woke up with a lump in his throat and his heart in his mouth.

When he woke up for the fourth time, he felt relieved to see the sun

peek into the living room through the blinds. Dustin had mentioned meeting up with the party for a D&D-afternoon, and they seemed to have agreed on their second day in Hawkins. He was running around in the kitchen, throwing nibbles and finger food in a backpack.

‘Hello, Sleeping Beauty, it’s past two! Are you gonna be okay? We are at the Byers’, if you wanna join us later on. I’m sure Nancy and Jonathan would be happy to entertain you – where has she put the car keys...?’

Steve put a pair of jeans and a shirt on, combed his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat, ‘Do you want me to give you a ride? For old times’ sake?’

Dustin nodded silently, grabbed the backpack and left the house yelling a goodbye upstairs. Steve followed after grabbing his jacket from the pile that had grown on his bag. He didn’t waste another thought on his suit that was still crumpled up in the depths of it, and that he had only packed because he thought that he might have to impress his former classmates.

They talked about Harvard and Dustin’s newest project, just like they had discussed homework and school projects, AV club or Snow Ball dates. Dustin asked about his plans for the day and frowned when Steve couldn’t tell him what he would do.

‘Try exploring the new Hawkins. There are a few new shops, you might find something for that empty shelf you have in your flat. Or maybe you run into some former classmates.’

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t hope for that to happen. Too many unpleasant memories,’ Steve pulled up into the Byers’ yard and patted Dustin on the shoulder, ‘go get them tiger.’

Dustin looked at him, deadpan. With a final purr he got out of the car.

‘I told you to stop that fifteen years ago,’ Steve yelled after him, but Dustin just flipped him off and went inside.

Steve backed out of the driveway. Dustin had been right to doubt his

ability to find something to occupy him with. In the end he just didn't want to admit that he had no idea what to do in Hawkins. If anything, he needed anything to kill some time before returning to watch the kids play their Dungeon game.

He drove around aimlessly, looking at the shops to both sides of the street. Of course he knew most of the 'new' shops from New York, the only difference was the lack of yellow cabs. A few of the faces he saw walking up and down the street seemed familiar, he could just hope not to meet any of his parents' acquaintances.

Swallowing against the new lump in his throat he set a turning signal. Dustin would tell him to rip the bandaid off without further ado, to bite through it all and just face it. He hit the gas pedal resolutely, turning and speeding down one of the roads towards Maple Street, only to take another turn right just before, into Cornwallis. He felt a distant tug at his heart as he drove down the road, just up to the point where he could see up the driveway from the curb.

The wooden planks were still painted grey, the windowsills white, and the door red. The driveway looked as clean swiped as ever, no pebble was out of place and a polished car stood in front of the garage driveway. Steve parked and leaned forward, looking up to the house. Something heavy seemed to weigh him down, he felt tears sting in the corners of his eyes. Looking up there reminded him of everything, of his first birthday party, the long afternoons spent at his desk, playing basketball alone in the front yard, and swimming in the pool late at night. He remembered his mother staying home when he fell ill as a kid, his father disappearing in his study, both of them leaving for another business trip, both of them returning with a souvenir and a smile for him. When he closed his eyes, he could smell his mother's apple pie, his father's cigars that he got out whenever he expected business partners, the way the chlorine clung to their towels after an evening in the pool.

It all was gone now, he reminded himself, as he saw a shape walk by the kitchen window. What could they be doing in there? It was a warm, sunny day – spending it poolside seemed the best way to cool down. He had been right, it all came back to kick him in the ass.

Steve clutched the steering wheel and rested his head on top of his hands. Confronting his demons seemed no longer a good idea, it had just remembered him of how it had been too painful from the start. The tears were no longer just burning in the corners of his eyes, instead he could feel them drop onto his thighs and soak through his jeans.

A car pulled up next to him, the engine loud enough to have him expect the SUV. Looking up, he realized that he had been sitting in his car for longer than he had thought, it had begun to dusk and his muscles hurt from remaining in their position for hours. He felt empty, like a sponge that had been squeezed long and hard enough to shed its last drop, his skin felt taut and his hands shook after he detached them from the steering wheel.

‘You look like you could do with a cup of coffee. Do you want to come down to the station with me?’ Hopper leaned against the Beemer.

Steve blinked a few times, just to reassure himself that he wasn’t seeing ghosts again. Then he nodded, wiping briefly at his eyes to dry the last traces of his tears. He waited until Hopper was back in his SUV and started the engine again. With a last glance back to his childhood home, he followed the police car down the road he had driven up hours before.

Hopper walked him through the lobby of the station, into his office. Nodding to his visitor chair he went back to get coffee and a few leftover doughnuts from the box they had passed on their way in. Steve took the cup of coffee from Hopper with the attempt of a smile. Neither of them said anything. He began to look around in the office, taking in the mostly empty case files, the framed photos on Hopper’s desk showing the party, Jane, and all of them together at Steve’s graduation because his parents hadn’t been able to make it, and the mess of notes and slips of paper.

‘How are Powell and Calaghan?’ he asked once he could trust his voice again.

‘Powell retired four years ago, made the smart choice. Calaghan got transferred,’ Hopper grabbed a doughnut and ate half of it with one

bite.

‘What about Flo? Is she still around to annoy you into eating something healthy, and drinking something but coffee?’

‘Died two years ago. Didn’t Jane tell you? She’s working as our secretary now.’

Steve stilled in his chair. The weight on his chest was back, he felt it rear up again until it had almost closed his throat, ‘Jane? Didn’t she and Mike live in Indianapolis? That’s what Dustin told me, that Mike is an electrician, and Jane is a social worker. Yesterday, she spoke about troubled kids coming in.’

‘I guess she gets those when they come here to talk to an officer. In that way, she is a social worker. And Mike is an electrician – they moved back to Hawkins six years ago, have their own place close to the ‘Nova’, they helped Lucas and Maxine reopen it.’

‘Excuse me?’ Steve felt the blood leave his face, ‘What are you talking about, last time I asked, they were in California –’

‘They never left. Instead, they took on the re-opening of the now most popular restaurant in Hawkins. Lucas is a great chef and Max does everything related to management.’

‘Why didn’t they tell me?’ Steve scratched his forearm absentmindedly, a mechanism he had come to use whenever he needed to ground himself, ‘I mean, I thought I knew what they did all those years – Dustin still goes to Harvard, right? I didn’t dream that up?’

Hopper nodded, his brows knit together, ‘Listen, kid, I don’t know why they wouldn’t tell you what is going on in their lives, and isn’t my place to attempt an interpretation. But they will have their reasons.’

‘I haven’t been here in ten years, I would never know what is true and what made up. How should I know if they lied to me? Why would they lie?’

‘Those kids still adore you, Steve,’ Hopper reached out for another

doughnut, ‘never forget that. They know what you went through, and that you are still dealing with a lot. Hell, they have experienced enough to know that you are going through worse. I can imagine that they don’t want to worry you.’

Steve looked at him with hopefully enough suspicion to show Hopper that he didn’t buy a simple solution, ‘Still, something is off about it. It doesn’t seem like them to lie to me. Dustin in particular. He’s been my contact into Hawkins, he has told me whatever happened. He told me about Nancy and Jonathan becoming teachers, about Will’s career as the most popular nurse in all of Hawkins – he told me about Mike and Jane, and Lucas and Max as well, but why would he lie when it came to them?’

Hopper got up and opened a mini fridge in the corner, ‘Beer? Listen, kid, don’t beat yourself up about it. Yes, it was Max’s dream to go back to Cali just like her brother wanted to. In the end she and Lucas ended up here because of family issues I don’t need to elaborate, that’s not for me to tell. But think about what you would’ve said. You were the one to encourage them to follow their dreams, no matter what would happen. Yes, I know about the late night conversations, I’m not as stupid as you all seem to think. You always said you would end up behind a desk, leaving behind your dreams. But what did you really abandon, hm?’

Steve leaned back again, a cool beer in one hand, and the other curled into a fist, ‘So apart from the slight location changes I haven’t missed anything? You haven’t Joyce Mrs. Hopper, and Jane and Will siblings yet?’

‘At some point, kid,’ Hopper took a swig of his beer and patted his shoulder, ‘you remember the promise to be Jane’s maid of honour?’

‘Break a promise I made a girl that could snap my neck with one thought? I don’t think so,’ Steve raised his bottle, ‘I would repeat it anytime.’

‘That’s good,’ Hopper still looked at him like he could read his inner turmoil, ‘Steve, kid, you know you can come to me, talk to me, if you ever need to. If you still struggle with what has happened –’

‘I’m fine, Hop, really.’

‘I wasn’t finished. You don’t stay away ten years without reason, now, you know we are all here for you. Still, you decided to leave and asked Joyce and me to take care of everything. We respect that decision, kid, but we will not watch as you ruin yourself to follow whatever self-destructive path you’re on.’

Steve opened his mouth to defend himself, stopped by one wave of Hopper’s hand, ‘Come on, you can’t come here and expect we don’t see that you’re even skinnier now. ‘Working long hours,’ guess what: I know what that entails.’

His radio cackled, interrupting the silence between them with the usual distortedness of a voice, ‘Done with my patrol. I’m turning in for the night.’

Hopper reached for the radio with an apologetic glance at Steve to answer, ‘You fucking will not, Hargrove! Do your damned job and come back to the station!’

Steve felt a shiver run down his spine. His fingers grabbed the beer bottle tighter, the moment during which he waited for Hopper to set down the radio again seemed to last a lifetime.

‘Hargrove? As in – Billy Hargrove?’ he knew his voice failed him, but it seemed too absurd to just expect the worst.

‘Yes, I took him on after Calaghan got transferred, almost ten years ago, honestly. He asked me to give him a chance to get his life together and now I have a very capable deputy.’

‘Well, I should head back, Dustin was under the impression that I would come by Joyce’s to watch them play. I actually might have to pick him up anyway. Thanks for the coffee. And the beer.’

Steve got up, grabbed his jacket and left the station. He all but ran towards his car, pulled the driver’s door open and got in. His hands shook again as he fumbled with the keys, trying to start the engine as fast as possible.

A car approached the police station as Steve backed out, another

police vehicle, he realized with a look in the rear view mirror. He felt sick to his stomach, disgusted by the way he had once again run away.

The party was still on their quest when Steve arrived, but agreed to postpone it until the following day. Dustin argued that they had little else to do with the reunion going on at the High School. Steve had pushed the reunion back into the farthest corner of his mind, hearing about it in the kids' conversation knocked the air out of his lungs. He masked it with a cough, but Jane looked at him funny nonetheless.

'Are you looking forward to seeing all these people again?' she asked with a concerned look, 'I thought you didn't like many of them.'

'Well, a reunion is always an opportunity to look how all the others have failed to reach their goals. You can feel so much better about yourself if there is someone who always spoke of becoming a sports superstar who turned out fat and unsatisfied when you yourself have accomplished at least one of your goals,' Steve shrugged.

'What did you accomplish?' Jane's honest interest made it impossible for Steve to throw her a sarcastic comment.

'I live in New York, I have a job and I can manage my affairs. That might be more than some of the others have come to have. I just think that I might no longer seem boring next to all the others.'

'You are not boring,' Dustin chipped in, 'just grown-up. It's pretty cool that you actually managed to leave Hawkins...'

'Yeah, about that,' Steve moved forwards on his chair, 'why on Earth would you tell me that Lucas and Max live in California, and Mike and El are in Indianapolis when really you all were here?'

'Oh shit, did Hopper really tell you?'

'Wrong answer, Michael!'

'Did you just call me Michael? Dude, we just wanted to keep you believing that we were pursuing our dreams. You worry so easily, and Dustin pointed out that we would be able to tell you anything because you mentioned that you didn't want to come back. If you

knew that we came back to Hawkins, after you left...we thought you might feel the need to move back, and you clearly needed the distance.'

'You can't just lie to me to keep me away,' Steve raked his fingers through his hair, no matter how nice you think you are! Dickheads! Friends don't lie, did you just conveniently forget that? Honestly, I don't get it! I would have complimented you on your food, Lucas, if I knew you had come up with it!'

Jane pursed her lips and nudged Max to say something. Max poked Will, who gave Lucas a stink-eye. Eventually, it was Dustin who spoke up, 'Okay, we did something shitty for all the right reasons. Can you see beyond that or are you going to be a bitch about it for all eternity?'

'Fuck you, Dustin, honestly,' Steve pushed past him on his way out, 'Get Mike or Lucas to drive you home!'

4. All Around Me Are Familiar Faces

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this is the chapter before the big revelation. If you have hypothesis' about what happend, I'm curious to know!

Chapter title taken from Tears for Fears' 'Mad World.

He still refused to talk to Dustin when he came into the living room, even when he set down a plate with pancakes and whipped cream. It wasn't that he still felt the anger bubble in his stomach, it was more that he wanted to keep up the ordeal for Dustin.

'Still not speaking with me? Uhm, Jonathan called just now. He and Nancy ask if you would like to join them at the reunion. They are there anyway and Jonathan offered to pick you up. If I remember correctly, Nancy wants to go grab something to eat before stepping into the lion's den,' Dustin sat down opposite from him and sighed, 'Look, I'm really sorry, man. It wasn't the best idea I had, I give you that.'

'You can say that again! Doctorate at Harvard, and you come up with that – I'm disappointed, Dustin.'

'It speaks,' Dustin grinned at him and nodded towards the pancakes, 'courtesy of my Mum. She wants you to finish that before leaving the house today. Also, she is proud of you.'

'Of what?'

'It's one in the afternoon and you slept for seven hours. Yes, she heard you thrashing around when she got up this morning to go to work. At six.'

'I can do the math. It's not the best thing to admit that I slept for seven hours from six onwards, but only because I couldn't sleep all night and my mind kept me busy,' Steve pulled the plate with the pancakes closer and dug in, 'Well, I'm awake now. And maybe I will be able to stay awake tonight with a bit of late sleep this morning.'

'You'll do just fine,' Dustin kicked his feet up on the coffee table and reached for a half empty bag from underneath it, 'just remember, you accomplished something, you left Hawkins and made something of your life.'

'Thanks, Dustin. Hey, when are you guys getting together?'

'Once you, Nance and Jonathan are gone. Mike and El are getting me on the way. Or could I have your car for the day?'

'Never in a million years, dipshit. The Beemer is my baby, I know how to take care of her and how to fix her – you are not getting your greasy fingers on her!'

'Hey – you sound like Billy Hargrove! And my fingers are not greasy!'

'You have your hand in a crisps bag right now,' Steve pointed to his lap and grabbed a fresh shirt.

Dustin didn't respond anything, instead he grinned and stuffed his mouth full with crisps. He lazed back into the armchair he sat in, and threw him a wink. Steve groaned and got up to take a shower. His suit still waited for him, folded up in his bag. It was one of his office suits, one of the expensive three-pieces he had invested in at one point because they were slimming, one that made his waist appear almost dainty. He had stopped caring about his appearance a while back, but what better time to start again and do something with his hair for the High School reunion?

Dustin still waited for him when he left the bathroom, 'Do you need hairspray? Can't go there without a battle armour, right?'

'Thanks, Dustin. I'll be just fine, I can take care of my hair in New York as well. I brought something back to avoid having to borrow from you,' Steve checked his hair in the hallway mirror, 'I'll give Nance a quick phone call.'

Nancy told him to come to Maple Street, Steve agreed and hung up, only to meet Dustin's grin, 'So, you're going out with Nancy and Jonathan?'

'Yup, meeting them now.'

‘Have fun. Don’t go to the dogs,’ Dustin waved after him as Steve left, his suit jacket slung over his shoulder.

The way over to the Wheeler’s took him a few minutes under the summer sun. He was glad to have opted against wearing the jacket. The sun painted the whole town in a golden shine, making it seem like a perfect place. The soft wind rustling through the green leaves of the trees in the front yards and back gardens accompanied the birds singing in their crowns. A little girl passed him on a tricycle, giggling at his quick Travolta impression as he strolled past.

As soon as the driveway came into sight, he could see Jonathan lean against his car as well. He greeted him with a short nod and grin.

‘Nance not ready yet?’

‘You know her,’ Jonathan sighed with an overdramatic roll of his eyes, ‘she finds one dress to wear, but as soon as she tries to leave the room she sees or remembers something that she deems more fitting.’

Steve joined into Jonathan’s laugh. They leaned back against the car, Steve closed his eyes and soaked the sun warmth up like a sponge. He still did not know what to talk about with Jonathan, but they got along. It was a status quo Steve didn’t want to break.

‘Hi Steve, there you are! We were waiting for you,’ Nancy left the house, tying her hair together, ‘can we go now, Jonathan? We have to hurry if we want to eat something before we have to get to the school!’

‘Sure, honey,’ Jonathan winked at Steve and got into the car, ‘oh by the way, Steve made fun of how long you take to get ready.’

‘Hey!’ Steve shoved at his shoulder from the backseat, ‘That was you!’

Nancy smiled and checked her hair in the rear view mirror, ‘Boys, please!’

They drove towards the High School building, Jonathan had proposed to park there early before everybody else arrived. During the short walk over to the diner, their old spot, Nancy almost skipped. They had spent long afternoons sitting in a booth in the

back, milkshakes in front of them, discussing schoolwork and the Upside Down. Returning now, after ten years, Steve felt giddy like a kid on the first day of the holidays.

‘Do they still put sprinkles on top of the whipped cream? Do you guys still go there?’

‘Only almost every day after school. And yes, still lots of sprinkles,’ Nancy opened the door, allowing Steve to pass her, ‘although Mrs. Parker isn’t longer around to get you an additional cookie, she retired.’

‘Shame, the best ones always go first,’ Steve sighed and looked around, ‘hey, our booth is free!’

They sat down, ordered, and had their shakes within minutes, since nobody else was around. Nancy toasted their getting together, their reunion.

‘Without the other idiots, assholes and bullshit-talkers. The three of us against the rest of the world,’ she seemed to shine with a smile that lit up their booth.

‘Just missing the six brats,’ Steve clinked their glasses together and rolled his eyes, ‘to a few days without the strain.’

‘To an evening of pretending not to be outcast anymore,’ Jonathan lifted his glass as well, ‘any expectations? Come on, Steve, what are the first things to come into your mind when you think about seeing all of them again?’

‘Uhm, dread. And the unescapable feeling that we might do something we might regret,’ Steve laughed out loud, ‘I guess I’m curious about how Tommy and Carol turned out. Do you know about what they did in the end?’

‘I...don’ know,’ Nancy shrugged, ‘Tommy has put on weight, Carol had a few kids, I think.’

‘We meet them in the store sometimes, they don’t look happy most of the time. It’s a small feeling of victory, to have come out on top.’

‘Jonathan –‘

‘No, Nance, I get what he says. It’s the same for me, feel good as long as you have managed something they didn’t, and be it happiness,’ Steve grinned and wiped milk foam from his upper lip, ‘Happiness might just be the one thing we can actually achieve.’

‘Hear, hear,’ Jonathan grinned again, nudging Steve in the side again, ‘happiness in Hawkins after all.’

‘You’re a school teacher with the love of your life by your side – yes, that’s you, Nance.’

‘Thank you, Steve, you are too kind,’ Nancy rolled her eyes at him, but the sweet curve of her lips curled up into a smile he knew too well, it had been his for some time, until it wasn’t anymore.

The pain wasn’t there any longer, he had realized that early on. It didn’t hurt to see them, to see Nancy and Jonathan, and how they smiled at each other. It had come as a surprise at first, how fast he had adapted to it.

But then again, it had been ten years since he had realized that he had moved on.

‘Now, when does the whole reunion start properly?’

‘Has already started,’ Jonathan smiled, ‘we just thought we’d show up fashionably late and drag you along.’

‘Now that is something I can work with,’ Steve leaned back and rubbed his temples, ‘I might remember how to make an entrance after all.’

‘Good for you. Now, it’ll be in the gym so everyone can admire the new PVC floor. There’ll be name tags and everything. I don’t know if we can spend the evening together, there’ll be your year and ours –‘

‘Excuse me? Why yours? Why do I only hear about that for the first time now?’ Steve had to cough into his palm to keep himself from spluttering all over the table, ‘You could have warned me!’

‘Warned you? What of?’

‘I don’t know, that I would be facing more than just the usual idiots,’ Steve grumbled and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Oh come on, Steve, it’s not that bad, you still know everyone,’ Nancy pulled at one of his hands, ‘we’ll still be there, and no matter who is there tonight will have grown up over the past fifteen years!’

Steve would have liked to believe her. No sooner than they entered the gym, there was one call going through the groups of people already standing around, as they made their way towards the table with the name tags.

‘Look over there, isn’t that -?’

‘I heard he was in New York.’

‘Do you think we can expect Jonathan and Nancy breaking up soon? What else should happen now that he is back?’

Steve rolled his eyes, and linked arms with Nancy and Jonathan. They just exchanged a knowing smile and followed him through the room. Steve scanned the remaining name tags on the table in front of them and felt one of the many thoughts storming up against his mind drop back down and retreat. The small tag bearing the name *Billy Hargrove* was still resting against a piece of decoration.

‘Someone get the keg, his highness is here!’

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and almost caused him to stumble and trip over his feet. The smell of high proof alcohol surrounded him in a heavy cloud, accompanied by the sting of a cheap cologne.

Tommy leaned into his side, swaying on his feet. A wide grin bared his teeth, the skin stretched over familiar freckles, making his face seem even rounder. He had shoved Nancy and Jonathan to the side to get to him, Nancy still rubbed the part of her arm where something, Tommy’s arm, presumably, had hit her.

‘Tommy,’ Steve sighed and pinned the name tag to his jacket, ‘what a

pleasure to see you again. You haven't changed a bit.'

'Can't say the same of you,' Tommy smacked his back again, 'You've put on weight.'

A fist came in, aiming for his stomach. Steve tensed, expecting the hit he would hardly feel. Instead, it was Tommy who stepped back with the power of the blow's recoil.

'Man, that's just...just -'

'- uncalled for? Forgive me, if I don't allow you to just hit me.'

'Doesn't he sound lovely, ey Carol?' Tommy called back over his shoulder, 'The king returns.'

'You haven't grown up at all.'

'Now look at you, Mr. Businessman, have you shown up again to remind all of us of your inability to party?'

Carol's shrieking voice pierced his ears and made him wish he had remembered to bring earplugs. She had put on weight as well, wore glasses and looked tired.

'Hello Carol,' Steve looked over a few heads, trying to find Nancy and Jonathan again, 'how is everything going?'

'Well, I had four kids, Tommy's just sitting on his ass all day and I have to do everything around the house. He's a useless prick, that one.'

'But you're still together?'

'I had his kids. Who'd take me with four kids and looking the way I do, what do you think?'

Steve felt uncomfortable. Carol was too close for his liking, he had lost Nancy and Jonathan, and the music was loud enough to momentarily deafen him.

'So what have you been doing?' Carol downed her drink in one go,

keeping her eyes glued to him.

‘I live in New York and work in human resources for a company in Manhattan. It’s office work, but it pays the bill.’

‘Did you say New York?’ Stacy and Tina appeared at his side.

Both had drinks in their hands that were obviously not their first ones. They leaned on each other more than they stood on their own, their dresses looked dishevelled and Stacy had spilled some of her red drink on her white skirt.

Steve rolled his eyes and pushed past them, ignoring the wailing women and Carol who yelled after him that he wasn’t any better just because he lived in New York. Still, there was no sign of Nancy and Jonathan.

He left the gym, intending to get some fresh air. A few of his old classmates stood together having a smoke. He passed them, looking for a place where he could be alone. There were too many people around who knew him, who would have no qualms about approaching him. He left the premises and walked down the road. This had been his route to school for years. First on the shiny bike he had gotten for his thirteenth birthday, then in his Beemer. He still knew every pothole, every picket fence, and every mailbox on the way back.

Walking calmed him down, he didn’t do it often. It was something that came to him together with the fresh air around Hawkins. It was a break from the usual running and stressing about everything. It was a clear, dark night, stars sparkled above him and lit the streets up beyond the streetlights. Steve passed the cinema and the store, walked along the neatly cut lawn edge in Mr. Trevor’s garden, and turned into Elm Street. He knew who lived here, knew who would stand at the window in the morning when the kids drove to school, knew who would retreat to their back gardens to avoid the cheery laughter in the afternoon. He knew about the holes in picket fences, knew where cats and dogs slipped away from their owners or where the kids next door shared their climbing frames and swings. He knew where the pools were nice and cool in summer and who had a sledding slope in their garden.

There were things, rooted in his mind, that he could not forget. The little details stuck to him, knowledge buried deep in his consciousness. He passed a wonky mailbox that he had crashed into one time, when he had just learned how to drive. His father had him apologize to the Roberts, and gave them money to fix their mailbox. They still hadn't done that.

He turned around the last corner before he stood in the same driveway he had ended up in the night before. There were a few lamps switched on behind closed curtains, yellow light shone onto the cobbled yard.

Steve could see his old basketball hoop over the garage gate, where his athletic career had started out. He remembered long summer afternoons, filled with one attempt after another to score. His father had stopped for a moment every other day after coming home from work to criticise and judge him.

Steve sat down on the curb and tried to spot something beyond the curtains, it wasn't like he could walk in and look around. Somebody walked past the living room window, he could see how they picked something up and turned back around. His mother had gotten books for him, years ago, after his father had sent him to bed. He had read them late at night, with nothing but a torch for light, until his eyes fell shut and the book on his face.

Ten years since he left behind everything that had been in this house, everything that had been his childhood, his family, his steadfast. Ten years since he had closed a door on Hawkins because anything else had been too painful to remember. It still tore through him with the might of a thunderstorm.

5. A Long Time Ago

Notes for the Chapter:

Here it comes, the flashback that had me sweating all the while I wrote it.

Enjoy!

The call woke him up. A quick glance onto his alarm clock let him groan out in annoyance as he padded through his bed room to the telephone. He dreaded answering it every time it rang this late at night.

'Harrington.'

'Steve, get your ass down here! We're expecting a breach – don't forget the bat!'

His systems kicked into gear instantly. He got dressed within minutes, grabbed the emergency bag from the chair it usually sat on and left his flat ten minutes after hanging up. He started his Beemer thirteen minutes after hanging up. He was on the highway an hour later, thanks to the empty streets at four in the morning. He speeded, of course he did, there was a breach to happen and any second could help his friends in their fight.

He reached Hawkins in time to get something to eat at the Byers' before getting his bat from his house, noticing his parents' absence, and helping the kids and Hopper with the traps and strategies of the upcoming night. Dustin grinned wide as they laid out a false trail of bacon and meat.

'This is the biggest déjà-vù I have ever had, it's just like five years ago,' he threw a piece of steak on the forest floor, 'it's funny how those things happen over again.'

'If you think that's funny you haven't heard the newest joke that makes rounds at the office,' Steve aimed for a trunk with a chicken filet, they had raided the store for whatever meat they could buy.

'Don't,' Dustin wailed, 'your jokes are horrible! They make no sense as they are and you make them even worse!'

The next piece of meat hit Dustin in the face.

'Idiot,' he spat, 'I know you can aim better than that.'

'Then you know that I didn't miss.'

'Can you stop the fucking bickering? It annoys the hell out of the rest of us!'

'What crawled up your ass and died, Sinclair, huh?' Steve turned around to where Lucas was wiring the trail, *'Can't we joke and ease the dread at least a bit?'*

'It's his birthday!' Will shouted from way back, *'He's pissed because those stupid things ruined it. All he wants is a bit of peace and quiet.'*

'Oh poor Lucas,' Steve laughed and turned around to face them, *'we should have a party after we finish this. A proper one, with cake and music and too much to drink.'*

'He turned eighteen, not twenty-one,' Dustin chipped in, *'Hopper would never allow it.'*

'Hopper has allowed us other stupid things, we could try,' Mike suggested.

'All in time, first we need to set the trap and agree on how to proceed.'

They finished the trail, leading up to the junk yard. There they met with the rest of their group, Nancy and Jonathan who had set up their own traps, Jane, Max and Hopper who had prepared a fortress out of old vehicles and the junk they could find. The last one to arrive was Joyce, arms full with baskets. She brought food for days, enough 'to feed the whole bunch of Demodogs after they have killed us all,' as Hopper said when he saw her.

She hushed him and set down what she had brought, 'We need to be prepared for the worst, Hop, you know that. Has everyone brought a sleeping bag?'

'We are not going to be sleeping, Joyce,' Hopper inspected the outcome of the barriers Jane had built, *'there is a danger out there that cannot find us sleeping.'*

They went about their plan, everyone had their station and position to

hold. Jane, Mike and Lucas on the roof of the old bus that was the centre of their fortress, Max, Steve, Nancy and Dustin hidden away at four posts with their weapons, Hopper in a blind spot, and Will, Joyce and Jonathan inside the bus, operating the wire lined traps from afar.

Their wait began with the onset of dusk. With every position filled there was nothing more to do. They all felt the lingering danger, the thrill and tingling of what was about to happen next. Every sound coming from around them, every breaking twig, every disturbed leaf a threat. They waited for the first recognizable movement coming from the woods that wasn't twigs swaying in the mild breeze or a bird flying up into the darkening sky. Steve felt it all surge through his veins with a most welcome anticipation. He could feel the hairs on his arms stand on edge. He knew about his own recklessness, but was confident that he would be able to control it to bring out his best fighting.

'Twelve o'clock,' Mike spied through his binoculars, 'and it's a hell of a lot more than you predicted, Hop!'

They readied themselves, everyone to their own knowledge and skill. None of them did as much as flinch as the pack of Demodogs charged at them, petal-shaped jaws opened and ready to attack. Steve swung his bat at the first monsters to reach their battlements. He heard Nancy's shotgun and the squeals of those Demodogs hit by Lucas' slingshot. Dustin's home-made flamethrower lit up his corner of the fortress, prompting Steve to take a step back.

Hopper fired his first shots, Steve knew the difference, Nancy's shotgun sounded entirely different. There was nothing to judge the situation but those sounds, he didn't have the time to look around, with at least ten Demodogs trying to get closer to him.

One of the traps was set off, Steve took notice of it and ignored the strategic use of the traps, namely, being used as solution when the situation grew unpromising. Steve let the bat hit a Demodog in the head, threw another off the piece of scrap metal he had been hiding behind and punched one that had come to close.

'Hopper!' Lucas sounded panicked, 'There are people coming up here!'

The curses that spilled from Hopper's lips had Steve relieved that all the

kids were eighteen now, despite knowing that at least three of them had used worse swears. The pressing matter at hand seemed to petrify them all for a moment.

‘Distract them, Steve, get them to go leave, somewhere where no people except us get in the way!’

‘Why me?’ Steve smashed another Demodog’s chest, yelling back over his shoulder.

‘You have the juiciest butt to present as bait,’ Dustin howled over the noise of his flamethrower.

‘Was that supposed to convince or coax me into this madness?’

‘Did it work?’

Steve caved a leathery chest in, ‘Yes!’

‘Can you stop your flirting?’ Nancy appeared next to him and shoved one of the last pieces of meat into his back pocket, ‘Any idea where to have them go?’

‘My parents aren’t home.’

‘Good idea,’ Hopper grabbed his shoulder and looked him in the eye, ‘Listen, kid, if anything goes wrong –’

‘We have a protocol, Hop. You know that bear from our back garden is still out there...’

Hopper nodded and pressed a lighter into his hand, ‘We might not be there immediately. Stay clear of the traps, if you promise that, we can set them off and minimize their number. Can you do that?’

‘Lead those beasts through the traps without being the one crossing them? Sure!’ Steve swirled his bat, a sign all of them knew to be nervousness, ‘Okay, I’m ready.’

He gave Hopper a sharp nod, grabbed his bat tight and turned towards the Demodogs outside of their barriers. Chances were, he would not reach the house. He might, if he managed to lead at least a few of them into the

traps, and lessen their number.

'I'm going,' he said and patted Dustin's shoulder, 'see you later. Don't leave me hanging!'

With that, he charged at the ramp that had been built into their battlements. It allowed him to leap over the thick gathering of Demodogs, land on his feet and set off at top speed. He ran, with literal devils on his heels, zig-zagging in between trees, jumping over roots and stones, passing by the traps, close enough to miss them – but still, close enough. The sound of the traps springing shut chased him through the forest, until he could almost see his house.

He felt his lungs burn, but if the sounds around him were anything to go by, he had gained a few metres on the Demodogs. Apparently, the plan including the traps had worked.

Steve knew how he would do it. The house would survive a lock-down, he could trap all the remaining Demodogs inside long enough for the rest of the party to arrive. There would be an explanation for his parents, like always, like every time something happened.

He jumped over the threshold, sprinted into the kitchen and pulled the spare fuel canister out from under the sink. There would be an explanation. Maybe his parents had forgotten to switch off the gas tap.

The new trap was set quickly. Steve emptied the fuel canister and hid in the corner between living room and lobby, breathing as quietly as possible, bat in one hand, Hopper's lighter in the other. Again, the small sounds were of so much more interest than anything his eyes could deceive him with. Birds flying away, twigs breaking, leaves rustling, it all told him something about what was going on outside.

And then the door opened.

Out of all sounds, this one was the one Steve had not expected. Demodogs did not open doors, they crashed through any breakable surface, but they certainly didn't open doors. He held his breath, not daring to call out to find out whether it was Hopper and the kids. The monsters could be even closer, and drawing attention to himself was something he could not dare.

'Well, that was nice, don't you think?'

'A heated pool really is something to indulge in. We should go swimming late at night more often.'

Steve felt his blood run cold. His parents' voices echoed through the living room, accompanied by wet footsteps and the opening of the glass door. Why were they home? He had been home earlier and they had been gone, he had assumed that the house was empty. Even now, he hadn't seen the car.

He got up, abandoning his post, appearing in the doorway, bat in hand, lighter still in the other, his fingers cramping around the metal. And there they were, standing in the middle of the room, towels wrapped around their bodies and smiling.

'Mom? Dad – what are you doing here? I thought you were –'

'Oh Steve, you are here? What a nice surprise. Have you had something to eat? I can warm something up for you, I'm sure there is a casserole in the fridge,' his mother wiped a strand of hair from her forehead, 'now –'

'No, no – you need to get out of here, okay, just get out, get in the car, and drive! Okay? Get in the car and drive away, no matter what happens. Did you hear me, Dad? Just this once, listen to me, please!'

Steve waved for them to go, ignoring the fact that his parents stood in the middle of the fuel soaked carpet, and that the rustling out of the woods grew louder with every second. He ignored his father's appalled looks, all directed to the nail bat in his hands.

'Steve, I do hope this is a strange prank –'

'Dad, come on! I'm serious, you need to get out of here! Please, don't just stand there,' there was no time to get to the car, Steve knew that, not anymore, 'at least go upstairs and wait there, it's not safe, Mom, please! Please, just listen to me!'

'Oh Steve, aren't we a bit dramatic? What have you and your friends planned again, a treasure hunt?'

'Dad, now!'

Glass splintered. Window frames creaked. Wood chippings rained to the ground. Steve stepped back, pressed his back to the wall and clutched the bat closer to his body. He felt the tears sting in his eyes, the dread surging up through his every vein. He heard them, he heard their claws on the hardwood floor, their greedy shrieks – and his mother's screams. He had his own Demodogs to fend off, trying to get back into the living room.

He needed to get back in there.

He took one glance at the living room and felt his blood boil. The first bunch of Demodogs hovered over his father, his face and abdomen gnawed open already. His white towel was blood soiled and torn to rags. Steve roared out in blind anger and flung himself at them

The bat connected to jaws, chests, abdomens and backs, splattering blood everywhere. He felt the warm drops on his face and on his arms, felt the scratches the Demodogs' teeth inflicted on him but it hardly kept him from swinging the bat around trying to hit as many as possible. The lighter in his hand reminded him of the fuel on the ground. The force of the impact had thrown his mother off the carpet. She lay in front of the fireplace, Steve took one look to see the Demodogs around her, but she breathed, her chest still rose and sunk and all he had to do was get the monsters away from her.

He flicked the lighter open, let the flame steady itself, and threw it onto the carpet. He felt the heat, but turned his back to it, the fire would either take care of the remaining Demodogs there, or at least keep them away. For a moment he felt like the only thing he had to do was getting those beasts away from his mother.

He felt the rage in his bones, all that was on his mind, all that kept him going was the urge to kill them, to get them away from his mother. His arm was sore, he felt everything around himself move at light speed, too fast for him to follow, but he knew how to aim, how to cave in petal shaped jaws and end a Demodog.

The moment the last corpse dropped to the ground, Steve knelt next to her. He wanted to wish away the puddle of dark blood, the red splatters on the hardwood floor, the smell of the fire braising flesh. He didn't want to concern his mind with the question whether it was a Demodog or his father that was getting cooked.

'Mum?' he tried to stop her bleeding but there were too many wounds to determine which wound was the most fatal, *'Mum, please!'*

He cradled her head in his lap and held her close, stroking her wet hair. His blood cooled down again, only then realizing that he had somehow killed the pack of Demodogs. Hot tears dropped from his eyes, painting another pattern on the wooden floor. He could feel the warm blood from around them soak through his pants, but couldn't bring himself to care when he realized that his mother was still breathing.

'Mum? Mum, can you hear me?'

'Angel...,' she lifted her hand to lay it on his cheek and smiled at him, 'you shouldn't...have to be alone...'

Steve felt her fingers tremble against his skin, she had to exhaust herself to draw in another breath. He couldn't say a word of comfort, to dark and pressing seemed it all to be. Her breathing staggered, hitched, her eyes glazed over with the certainty of the end coming to meet her.

'Mum? Mum! Mum, say something, anything! Mum!'

Her eyes lost the spark, her head her grasp around his wrist grew limp and her head rolled to the side, eyes staring blind in the empty room. Steve felt his own breath stop, he felt the cold darkness reach for his heart, and squeeze it until every thought of hope and trust had been smothered and extinguished. His parents had died, killed by the monsters he had fought for seven years, and yet, he had not been hurt, apart from a few bloody scratches and a bite mark around his ankle where he hadn't been quick enough to dodge a hungry mouth.

He had failed. He had killed his parents. He had lost.

Hopper found him, a while later, still kneeling in blood next to the still smouldering carpet, his mother's head cradled close, crying until his eyes ran empty – but his body still trembled with dry sobs. The man pried his mother's corpse from his hands and led him from the house he had called his home.

Sitting in Hopper's car, with a blanket around his shoulders and a drink from his father's cabinet, he saw the others arrive. The kids stared at the

Demodog corpses with gaping mouths and big eyes before Joyce got them to turn away from where Hopper tried to conceal the things that had happened. He would get Dr. Owens and his men to hide everything, to make up a story.

Steve could already see the headlines. He could imagine what would be the official story. They had a protocol after all, his parents' bodies looked torn up in wild anger, remembering it had him want to retch. A bear would satisfy everyone's needs to know.

Imagining what would happen once Hopper had access to a phone made Steve feel sick to his stomach. Hopper was still walking around the living room, Joyce had led the kids away, Nancy and Jonathan had come by for a few minutes. Nancy had cried when she hugged him, not able to utter a single word, before both disappeared into the night, Jonathan at her side, providing the support she needed. Steve was left with his thoughts, drowning him in despair and fear. What was to happen next, who would be able to help him out of the void that filled his head since the moment his mother's body had gone slack in his hands.

Steve climbed out of the car, threw the blanket back onto the passenger seat, and ran off. He didn't know where to, what to do and why he ran, but the thought of staying seemed worse than the unknown. Tree branches hit his face, whipping him and re-opening the scratches and wounds on his face. Getting away from his house, from the corpses, meant returning to the town, fast asleep now that the clock handles had passed midnight.

He ran down the empty streets, remembering scenes from his childhood, shopping with his mother, accompanying his father, visiting friends with his parents, running away from them when he felt like no one minded his absence, finally, the freedom that came with his parents going on joint business trips.

His steps led him to the cemetery, where his grandparents were buried, where his parents would soon be buried – he broke down over his grandmother's grave, sobbing and clawing at his eyes at the same time because they burned, already irritated by his earlier tears. Something within him didn't feel right, as if a parasite had lodged itself onto him that could not be satisfied; there was an emptiness he could not grasp, nothing left to feel in his soul beside it. Again, he felt like he was drowning in his thoughts.

'Harrington?'

He had heard the step approaching, his skin had tingled with the anticipation – and a small part of him wished it to be a stray Demodog, come to relieve him of his pain. Instead, he heard the voice of someone he had not imagined to hear during his stay. He had only come to fight back against the monsters, not the humans as well. Too exhausted to respond, all he did was still, kneel next to his grandparents' tombstones.

'Come on, man, I can tell it's you,' again the voice, steps approaching, 'what are you doing that late in the graveyard?'

'Go away,' Steve rasped and waved at him, merely approximating the direction he was coming from, 'do I look like I want to be in company?'

'Yes, actually,' he sat down next to him.

Steve's head spun around. He stared at him, eyes red and puffy, his tears hidden by the dark around them. Billy Hargrove returned the stare, not even blinking.

'What are you doing here?' Steve wiped his nose with the sleeve of his sweater.

'Walking. I couldn't sleep, and I saw you running down the street. Well, at least I can now claim that I can recognize you by your walk.'

'Why here? You live all the way down –'

'I moved out. Yes, I kinda guessed that Max wouldn't tell you. I moved out as soon as I could afford my own place,' Billy's voice seemed to waver for a moment, 'what about you? I heard you were in New York, what are you doing here, in this condition?'

Steve felt his body shake, by now not only because he had exhausted himself, but also because the night was chilly without the blanket he had left in Hopper's car, and his jacket, that had must have gone lost at some point during the night.

'I already told you, I wanted to be alone.'

'Good, don't tell me – are you cold?'

Trying to hide the obvious shiver seemed almost unnecessary, Billy had already grabbed him and dragged him to his feet. Before he knew it, he had been pulled away from the grave, away from the cemetery, towards an apartment building. Steve felt himself being manhandled into the hallway and up the stairs towards what he only could assume to be Billy's flat.

'You need a warm shower, I guess,' Billy pushed him into the bathroom and closed the door behind him, shouting from the other side, 'I'll get you some sweatpants and a clean shirt.'

It was only then that Steve realized what he looked like and that there was no chance of Billy not having noticed the blood and his wounds. He felt too tired to ask himself why he hadn't mentioned it. The prospect of a warm shower, maybe even managing to drown everything out, was promising enough for him to accept the offer.

He showered, felt the blood get washed away and warm drops massage his shoulders. It gave him the temporary feeling of having something secure. There was a knock on the door after he had turned the water off, Billy waited with the promised sweatpants and shirt. Steve got dressed and left the bathroom with his clothes bundled up under his arm.

'Feeling better?'

He couldn't respond, he couldn't possibly tell Billy that he had just killed his parents, that he wanted to leave Hawkins, run away and never return. There was nothing he could say that would even begin to explain what had happened. Just for one moment, silence seemed the better alternative.

'Why did you bring me here?'

'You looked lost and in need of someone,' despite all, Billy smiled at him, 'I thought maybe you wanted to keep me company, I don't sleep much and you seemed pretty awake.'

There was something suggestive in the way Billy spoke, Steve latched onto it and watched the other. He stood in front of him, arms crossed, with an easy smile on his lips and his hips cocked. Steve saw how his tongue slipped out of his mouth, licking his lower lip and how he shifted on his feet under his stare.

'I don't feel good tonight,' he said, stepping closer, 'I've been through hell, and all I want is to sleep, but since I won't sleep dreamlessly anything else is welcome to make me forget.'

Billy's eyes lit up, he stepped closer and lifted one hand, only to rake it through Steve's hair until it rested against his cheek, 'No questions asked.'

'No questions asked.'

The promise filled the shrinking distance between them before their lips connected in a devouring kiss. Steve melted against Billy, allowed himself to hand himself over, allowed Billy to decide what to do with him. He lacked the energy to do so himself.

He let Billy guide him through the apartment, without resisting. He felt the bed in his back, felt himself sit on the mattress, felt Billy crawl over him, touching, devouring. It didn't take him long to be putty under his hands.

He let Billy fuck him, slow and quietly. They fell asleep entangled in each other's arms, Steve's head resting on Billy's chest. He felt his warmth and steady breathing, and it helped him ignore the gnawing pain in his guts. It was a sleep undisturbed by dreams or memories, until he woke up a few hours later.

The sun was up, birds sang and Steve remembered what had happened. He got up quietly, gathered his clothes together, and left the flat with one last look back at Billy who had curled into himself to make up for the loss of warmth next to him. Something about the way he lay under the covers made him seem small.

Steve turned around and closed the door. His movements seemed mechanical to himself, he ran down the streets again, until he arrived at the Byers' to get his car. No one seemed to be around, Steve thanked whoever looked after him for it. The last thing he wanted was to be asked how he felt and what he would do next. He got into the Beemer and drove off towards the police station. He needed to talk to Hopper.

And then he would leave Hawkins.

There wasn't much left to do, Hopper had already talked to Dr. Owens. Steve was handed a cup of coffee, whilst he waited for Hopper to finish a

list of tasks.

'What can we do for you? Dr. Owens has assured me that his men will take care of everything, your house will look like nothing happened. I will make sure that no one here will know.'

'I don't want to stay, Hop,' his voice shook, 'I don't want to see the sorry faces at a funeral, I don't want to hear the people complain about the missing safety around Hawkins when it comes to bears – I don't want to be reminded of my own fault.'

Hopper scratched his head, 'You know Joyce and I will help you with whatever you need, we are here for you.'

'I'll return to New York today. Please take care of everything, the funeral, the house – I don't care, rent it out and save the money. Use it for Jane's education, you know she'll want to know everything. Use it for the kids, tell them I sent it. Don't tell them about me leaving. I can't stand myself right now.'

Hopper's looks followed him outside, after they had drawn up a warrant that would allow the chief to take care of his business. He got into his car and exhaled one last time before speeding down the high street. He passed the 'Come Again Soon'-shield, unwittingly shaking his head in the process. Driving away from the town, from the place he had fought so many demons, leaving it all behind didn't feel wrong, and not at all like running away from something he did not wish to confront.

No one in New York would know. No one would know about his parents, no one would know about the Demodogs, no one would know about Billy. No one would know about Steve allowing himself to be weak and seeking refuge in the arms of another man and the way he felt about it.

And they still didn't. He breathed out shakily, his arms hugging his legs tight to his chest. A light had been switched off in the house Hopper had rented out to a young couple and their two children. Their rent still paid for Dustin's doctorate. Steve had never met them.

The tears streamed down his face again and he couldn't bring himself to care, he sat in the dark and there was no one around who could

see him like this. There was a family living in his childhood home who didn't know about what happened in their living room. It still hurt, not as overwhelmingly as it had ten years before, but still enough to make him sob about what he had lost.

Because who was he kidding, he had lost more than his parents during the fateful night. He had overpowered his curiosity, had resisted the urge to find out why Billy had appeared so different and changed that night. It had torn something out of him, giving himself up to be used, he had held onto it for ten years, had anchored himself in the dread of returning – but now, that he had actually set foot into Hawkins again, it felt like he had been missing something. The kids had noticed, of course they had, he had seen the looks they had exchanged. Yes, his parents had died. Yes, he had been shaken.

But what had it been that had kept him from returning so entirely? After a few years, he had started to think about it. He hadn't come to a conclusion, which made the pain gnawing at his heart even worse, but admitting it freely was harder.

He wished for the possibility to ask his mother for advice. Sometimes, when the nights grew too dark and empty for him to actually sleep, he lay awake and imagined his mother coming into his room to check on him. It broke his heart every time he did.

He still stared at the house when another window lit up upstairs. There was no way to know how late it was, he had forgotten his wrist watch at the Henderson's. But he didn't feel like re-joining the reunion, anyway. He rested his head on top of his knees and closed his eyes. The smell of the pines around the house reminded him of his childhood, before he had ended up in an office job, with no one to come home to.

'Steve?'

6. You Had Me Thinking

‘Steve?’

He felt him sit down next to him, close enough to feel the warmth he radiated. Steve looked up to see Billy Hargrove in full uniform, his hair shorter, even shorter than the last time he had seen him. A shudder ran down his spine when he remembered what they had done the last time. Now, Billy looked at him with deep, inquiring eyes, searching for something in his face.

Then, with a quiet groan, he turned to look towards the house. Steve couldn’t help but stare at him, the way his jaws were working an inciting view.

‘I figured I would find you here at some point ever since I heard you were back,’ he said with the air of someone who had thought about what to say once his moment came.

Then, there was silence. A few animals cried out in the woods, they could hear the water in the pool behind the house lap against the walls. Steve tried to control his breathing, not wanting to show any sign of how the company affected him.

‘Your parents died that night, right?’

Steve’s head whipped around. He felt like he saw, truly saw, Billy for the first time. Yes, his hair was shorter, but he also looked fitter, healthier, with muscles under the uniform where Hopper was soft. Billy’s eyes, however, had undergone the biggest change. They glanced at him with a kindness he didn’t know, still trying to figure something out about him that Steve could not pinpoint.

‘You’re a cop now?’ He knew it was a stupid question, Billy wore the uniform.

‘I started helping out, Hopper needed help and I needed a way out. I knew I couldn’t just flip burgers for the rest of my life...also...ever since I got to carry a badge people leave me alone.’

Steve had overheard Max and Jane from time to time, he knew enough to know whom Billy was trying to mention without naming him, ‘Your father?’

A sharp nod was all he got for a response. Again, the silence enveloped them for a moment, Billy started fumbling with his shoe laces.

‘I answered two of your questions. Will you answer two of mine?’

Steve drew in a sharp breath, his head running wild with possible questions and possible ways for him to put his foot in his mouth. He estimated a risk, calculated the possibilities of this scenario ending badly – and then, he nodded.

‘Were it Demodogs?’

‘How do you know –’ Steve knew he had opened his eyes wide, and that his jaw had hit the floor.

‘You were back in New York. You needed your distance, I get it. Shit happened, the Upside Down didn’t remain shut off. You weren’t around, I had been chopping wood and had the axe in hand when Max came to drag me off into my first fight. I took over.’

‘Like you took over the title?’

Billy recoiled, shaking his head, ‘No, fuck – never! Believe me, that’s the one thing I never could. Those kids still love you to bits, I wouldn’t even attempt to compete with you in matter of fighting those fucking beasts. They wouldn’t even allow me to do certain things, saying that you were better at it, anyway.’

Steve found a twig and started to draw a pattern in to dust to his feet, not reacting to Billy’s words at first. He seemed sincere in what he said he had been doing during these past ten years.

‘Yes. Demodogs. I didn’t know my parents were home, otherwise I wouldn’t have led those monsters back there. I killed them. I killed my parents with my stupidity,’ he crossed his drawing out, ‘the thing was that I didn’t feel it, you know? I didn’t feel like I had just lost my parents. I didn’t feel anything. I felt...empty. I felt fucking empty.’

The silence returned, like a blanket that kept them warm.

‘Second question,’ Billy rasped out, his voice shaking, ‘Did I help? Did...did it help?’

Steve didn’t need to ask what he meant. A warm blush ghosted over his face, he bit his lip to keep a surprised sound from slipping out.

He cleared his throat, ‘That is your second question?’

‘Believe me, I have so many questions, it might as well be,’ Billy huffed out and scratched the back of his head.

Steve jumped to his feet, grabbed Billy’s wrist and dragged him down the driveway.

‘What are you doing?’

‘We’re going to talk.’

‘I’m still on duty,’ Billy grinned and brushed off his shirt.

Steve came to a halt, throwing a glance over his shoulder, ‘Really? It’s Hawkins!’

Billy grinned in response. It lit up his whole face, blinded Steve for a moment and reminded him of old times. It stayed on his face until they reached the patrol car down the road. Steve recognized the car as the one that had returned to the station when he had left. They got in and Billy drove off.

‘Will you answer a few more of my questions?’

‘Depends on the questions,’ Steve leaned against the window so that he could look at Billy’s concentrated face, ‘and you have to promise not to crash us if my answer isn’t what you want to hear.’

Billy seemingly decided to drop his remark, ‘Are you okay?’

The question surprised Steve, ‘I guess so. I have my work, a flat and food in the fridge.’

‘That’s not what I asked you,’ Billy tightened his grip around the steering wheel, ‘next question; are you happy?’

‘That’s a stupid-ass question,’ Steve crossed his arms over his chest and pretended to sulk for want of an answer – unfortunately, Billy saw right through it.

‘You saw your parents getting killed in front of you by the monsters you spent years fighting, and slept with the next-best guy. I guess I just want to know if you got your shit together,’ Billy’s voice was raspy and he risked a glance in Steve’s direction.

It seemed like the mood had turned. Billy drove a route Steve knew from Hopper’s patrols. They didn’t talk for a few minutes, until they drove past the gym. A few people still stood outside the building, most of them were smoking, a few swayed on their feet.

‘Did you even know about the reunion?’ Steve fumbled with the hem of his shirt that had slipped out of his waistband and opened the buttons on his vest.

‘Yes, but I’m on duty.’

‘Hopper makes the rota up to your wishes, Billy.’

‘Okay, you got me. I didn’t need to see all of them again, okay? Tommy is an even bigger asshole than fifteen years ago, the cows didn’t get any prettier, and the only guy worth attending had left the town years ago. And yes,’ Billy looked to the side, ‘I’m still talking about you.’

Again, Steve felt himself blush. The smirk hidden in the corner of Billy’s mouth suggested he had seen it as well.

‘Another question for you,’ Billy set his turn signal and drove around a corner, ‘why did you come back after ten years? What made you personally think it was time?’

‘I’ve never been to my parents’ grave. I had Hopper and Joyce take care of everything and just left because I couldn’t stand being here any longer. And then, I went back to New York, without looking back. I didn’t even attend the funeral,’ Steve traced the car window

with one finger.

‘I know,’ Billy responded and set another turn signal, ‘I was there. The supposed bear attack went through the paper and I had pieced together that it had happened the night I...picked you up. Initially, I hoped to see you there after you left me to wake up alone. After learning what had happened and what kind of shit you were going through, I thought I might have been able to help you with a few things.’

Steve looked at him in surprise, ‘Billy Hargrove – you’ve gone soft!’

Both of them chuckled. Steve allowed himself a small smile, answered by Billy’s own lift of his lips. He recognized the surroundings and it sent shivers down his spine. They passed the cemetery.

‘Billy?’ Steve cleared his throat, ‘Are you okay?’

‘I work, I eat, I sleep. There isn’t much going on around here.’

Steve leaned back against the window, still looking at Billy. He captivated him again, the sharp form of his jaw and the glint in his eyes casting his usual spell on him.

‘Listen, Steve,’ Bill pulled over and parked in the street, ‘if I did something wrong, tell me, okay?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Steve frowned at the slight panic in Billy’s voice.

‘I couldn’t help but think about what we did and I have come to the conclusion that I took advantage of you –’

‘Stop, Billy, just stop,’ Steve turned to face Billy who still grasped the steering wheel, despite having pocketed the car keys already, ‘I might have been distressed and going through a lot, but I still knew what we were doing. And I told you already, it helped. A lot.’

‘You told everyone you made a mistake, Max told me eventually. They don’t know we slept together, right? For them, the mistake was going to your parents’ house, leading the Demodogs there. For me, it

was clear that you must have regretted our night, that I drove you away because I didn't even get to mention that I was trying to change throughout the whole time we spent with each other –'

'Billy,' Steve interrupted the other and took off his seatbelt, 'stop beating yourself up about it! I came here because deep down I hoped I would get to see you again, okay? I chickened out yesterday at the station – I'm not gonna let that happen again!'

He bent over the centre console and weaved his fingers in Billy's short hair. He pulled him closer, until he could cup his face with the other hand. They shared a look, Billy still didn't seem sure about Steve's answer. He sighed, rolled his eyes and stroked the soft hair under his fingers.

'Billy Hargrove, if I regretted the night ten years ago, would I do this?'

With that, he kissed him. He caught Billy's upper lip between his and sucked it in, running his tongue along it. The sound he managed to coax out of him made him proud. Billy's hair was soft under his fingers as he raked them through it until he could cup his face with both hands, tilting his chin up in the process to deepen the kiss.

'Steve,' Billy moaned into his mouth, 'Steve, you are –'

He didn't allow him to finish. Instead he climbed over the centre console, into Billy's lap, pressed them flush together and reconnected their lips. They kissed like they wouldn't have another chance, until Billy managed to pull himself together and push them apart a little.

'We should head upstairs, don't you think?'

They struggled to get out of the car, cross the road, and enter the building. Steve attacked his lips with kisses, starved and thirsty for more, now that he had tasted the sweet honey and sinful softness of his lips, combined with the harsh stubble around his chin.

Billy fumbled with his keys and tried to unlock the door, shoving him back in the attempt to get a moment without distraction. Steve stuck to his back instead, hugging him and snaking his arms around his

waist.

'Billy, hurry up,' he mumbled into the shoulder in front of him, and traced the line of his collar with his tongue, while mouthing at the skin showing, 'I'm getting cold.'

'Stop distracting me then, I can't open the door with you attached to me like a giant octopus,' Billy managed to open the door eventually, and they stumbled into the stairwell, holding hands.

They made their way up to the flat Billy still lived in, half dragging, half pulling each other up the steps, with one of Billy's arms wrapped around Steve's waist, just to stop in front of the next door as Billy had his keys ready again. Steve seized the opportunity and returned to his position behind Billy, making grabby hands at the keys – as if that would help them – and shoved them into the pockets of the police uniform when he couldn't reach the keys.

'You are the cutest, neediest pretty boy I have ever seen,' Billy groaned as soon as they had closed the door behind them, 'now get into the bedroom!'

This time, it was different. They were older, more grown-up. Where two twenty-four year olds had been fiery and desperate for easy release, where they had been scratching at each other's backs, they were more mature now, their movements more careful. Billy laid him out on the bed, undressing him carefully, taking in every inch of skin he could reach. Where Steve had begged him to take him, years ago, he now held onto Billy, who took his time kissing and stroking him, mouthing at his ribs and collarbones.

It was more intense, Billy moved cautiously and Steve met his moves with ready lips and rolling hips. He felt the way Billy cradled him close, held him through everything. It was too much of it at once, memories of a night fifteen years before mixing with the new experiences. The first tear squeezed out of his eye rolled down his temple, soaked up in his hair. Billy saw it, he could see his eyes light up with horror, before he swooped down to kiss the salty drops away from the corners of his eyes.

'Steve,' he whispered into the crook of his neck, once they were

coming down from their high, 'I...I - '

Steve met his searching lips and connected them again as Billy rocked them through their high. Muscly arms wrapped around him and pulled him close. He allowed himself to be buried under the warm body that held him tight and moved closer to it, assuring Billy that it was okay.

It took him a moment to recognize the soft shaking of Billy's shoulders. He raked his fingers through his hair again and lifted his head up a bit, until his chin rested on his chest. He met the wet eyes and hummed softly, wanting to show him just how much it meant to him.

'Will you stay?' Billy's chin pressed into his sternum as he spoke.

'Yes, of course I will.'

'Will you be here in the morning when I wake up?'

Steve heard the urgency in his voice, the slight waver as he pressed out the words, and he remembered the morning after, fifteen years before. He recognized the glint in Billy's eyes to be an insecurity he had not expected. Bending upward, he pulled Billy into a soft kiss.

'I will. Promise.'

Billy breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed on top of Steve, pressing his face into the crook of his neck. His shoulders still shook and Steve cradled his head close, stroking his hair and whispering sweet nothings into his ear. He assured him that he would still be there in the morning, again. He told him that he was grateful for him, that he had been throughout the years, that he had longed for the moment when he would see Billy again. That he had been scared by the way he had felt comfortable with him so shortly after losing his parents. That he had been scared he had felt comfortable with Billy, of all people.

Billy rolled off him a moment later, arms still wrapped around him. His eyes glistened in the dark room, studying whatever he saw in Steve's expression cautiously.

'You can wear waistcoats more often,' he hummed and pulled Steve closer.

Steve had to swallow at the sound of Billy's sleep-coloured voice and the throatiness that hit him. He moved closer, cuddling into the soft frame next to him.

They drifted into sleep, their arms and legs intertwined. Billy's head rested on Steve's shoulder, his breath hitting Steve's neck where the blood pulsed so near below his skin.

A car passed by outside, casting its headlights into the window. For one moment, they bathed the sleeping men in light before moving on and leaving them to sleep in peace.

7. The Sun Rises On A New Dawn

Notes for the Chapter:

Here it is, the last chapter to this story. It has been great fun to write something else than oneshots and ficlets.

Thank you for your kind words and comments.

Steve turned and struggled against the barriers restricting him. He could feel himself wake up, squinting into the sunlight that fell onto the mattress. He could see the pine trees around the cemetery through the window. Remembering where he was, he tried to move again, unsuccessfully. Groaning, he looked down where Billy's arms were locked over his waist as if he had secured them with a padlock. There was no possibility for him to escape the iron grip, not even to get to the bathroom. The only possibility for Steve to distract himself was Billy, more precisely, watching Billy sleep.

The long lashes resting against the sun-kissed skin shone in the early morning light; Billy's head had moved from Steve's shoulder throughout the night and rested on the pillow next to him. He looked at peace with his situation, no movement in his expression betrayed the seeming calmness. Last time he had woken up next to Billy, he had stolen a short glance before sneaking out of the flat. Billy had seemed tense, ready to jump out of the bed and block his way out.

Nothing indicated tenseness in Billy's face now, instead, a slight smile crept around the corners of his mouth. Steve could not remember seeing him like this, not during their High School time, not passing by in the five years following, not in that one fateful night. He had never seen Billy without his frown and the knitted brows, it seemed like Billy Hargrove could not exist without the wrinkle on his forehead. Steve had to admit that he liked to see Billy without the constant displeased expression on his face.

As far as remembering the past night went, Billy had not shown the frown until this very moment. Steve held his breath as the body next to him moved. The blanket slipped from Billy's shoulder, revealing the smooth curve of his rib cage and a stripe of golden hairs on his

chest, taunting Steve to the point that he wanted to bury his nose in it.

‘You’re still here,’ Billy blinked and yawned.

‘Where else should I be,’ Steve felt himself swallow against the frog in his throat that had kept his voice to be anything but a whisper, ‘did you sleep well?’

Billy loosened his grip around his waist and rested his head on his bent arms, ‘And yourself?’

‘I need to, you know? Go,’ Steve moved towards the edge of the bed.

Billy’s expression changed into one of horror, ‘Did I do something wrong? Why can’t you stay?’

‘Fuck, no – I need the bathroom, Billy,’ Steve felt the blush on his cheeks, the awkward silence between them.

He got up to grab his boxer shorts, left the bedroom and entered the bathroom next door. Leaning the head to the tiled wall, he breathed deeply. This was uncharted territory, he didn’t know what to expect of Billy Hargrove once both of them had woken up. How long would Billy expect him to stay, did he want him there now that they didn’t sleep anymore? Was he supposed to crawl back into bed with Billy? Did Billy have to work? Steve couldn’t decide which scenario would be worse.

‘Hey, are you alright?’ Billy’s voice from the hallway made him jump, almost.

‘Yes, one moment,’ Steve finished up and rinsed his mouth, no need for morning breath, no matter how the day turned out.

He could smell coffee when opened the bathroom door. The small wafted through the apartment, seemingly coming from the kitchen. Steve stopped halfway over the threshold, taking in the sight that presented itself to him.

Billy stood at the stove, a spatula in one hand, an enormous mug in the other, his back to the door. He seemed to hum the tune of one of

his old favourite songs while flipping pancakes, dressed in nothing but boxer shorts. Steve left his post leaning against the door frame and tried to cross the distance between them silently.

‘Try not to burn yourself,’ he grinned and pressed a soft kiss to Billy’s shoulder.

‘Jesus!’ Billy flinched under his touch and turned around, ‘You jumped me! I could have hit you, or spilled the coffee on you –’

Steve took the mug out of his hands and took a gulp, ‘Wow, this is good – you make a fucking good coffee.’

‘Do you want a cup of your own?’ Billy nodded towards a pot next to the stove.

‘No, I’m good with this one,’ Steve grinned at him over the cup he was still holding, ‘what are you doing?’

‘Making you breakfast, pretty boy, what else?’

A pleasant shudder ran down Steve’s spine upon hearing the old nickname, applied in the context of a morning together. Billy smirked at him, seemingly anticipating what he was doing to him, before crowding Steve against the counter next to the stove. He nipped at Steve’s lips, softly at first. Then, when Steve didn’t move away from him, he got more confident, capturing his mouth with his and pushing at him. One hand held onto Steve’s waist while the other grabbed the coffee mug from his hand and set it aside. He connected their stomachs, rolling his hips against Steve’s.

Steve felt Billy’s hot breath against his neck when they broke apart, but Billy’s arms were still snaked around his waist, the connection between them not broken entirely. He followed Billy’s lips, trying to get them back onto his. A desperate sound left his throat that had Billy smirking smugly.

‘Now, pretty boy, I still have a few pancakes on the stove and a lot of coffee to drink in order to wake up properly.’

‘You mean this didn’t wake you up?’ Steve followed Billy back to the stove, hanging onto him like a sloth baby.

'It did,' Billy assured him, pressing a kiss to his temple, 'but we will need to eat at some point.'

'How much time do we have?' Steve tried to sneak at least one hand under the waistband of Billy's boxers.

Billy swatted it away, 'All day, it's my day off. Lucky bastard!'

It took nothing more for Steve to switch the stove off, grab Billy by his wrists and manhandle him through the kitchen and the hallway towards the bedroom. He felt the anticipation surge through him, in time with Billy's hard breathing. His lips couldn't get close enough to Billy, he felt the need to practically crawl into him to satisfy the urge

—

'Okay, you guys are gross!'

They jumped apart, turning towards the apartment door. Steve hid behind Billy's back out of habit, not wanting to be caught in an explicit situation. Not, when the jaws that had dropped to the floor belonged to Dustin.

'Morning,' Billy seemed too comfortable, leaning in the door frame, 'didn't I tell you to knock before using your spare key last time?'

Max shrugged and took a bag out of Dustin's still-outstretched hands, 'We figured Steve would be here after Nancy and Jonathan called to ask whether we knew where he had disappeared. After the gym and the house were ruled out, there wasn't much left.'

'You knew we wouldn't kill each other?' Billy crossed his arms over his chest, 'How could you be sure?'

'I wasn't,' Max pulled a first-aid kit out of the bag, 'we don't seem to need it, though, Steve's hickey's should disappear soon enough.'

Steve, who remembered being pinned to the mattress and Billy's lips on his skin, sucking on his neck, biting and liking over the bones underneath. The memory itself had him blushing again. He felt Billy's arms around his waist, pulling him in front of himself and placing his lips back on the hickey he had sucked into the pale skin. For just one moment, Steve lost control and moaned softly into the touch.

‘Yeah, you are gross,’ Dustin rolled his eyes at them, ‘and here I was, fearing he might have left without telling us again.’

‘We should get out of here again, shouldn’t we?’ Max pretended to have to cover her eyes, despite smiling all over her face, ‘Although, we were supposed to invite them to brunch at the *Nova*’s. Do you think they will be able to stop their shenanigans for long enough to join us?’

They were, in the end, able to stop their shenanigans to join the rest of the party. Steve wondered, just for a moment, how everyone else would react to Billy being there. That was, before he remembered that Billy had been there to take over his position as the kids’ safe keeper. They were relaxed around him, maybe more so than Steve. All of them crammed into one booth added up to twelve people. Lucas and his cooks had provided a huge selection of brunch food for them, they dug in as if they all hadn’t eaten for days.

Nancy and Jonathan didn’t mention the reunion, Nancy had shot Steve one look and busied herself with a plateful of scrambled eggs and toast. Hopper and Joyce, both beaming with smiles, sat in one corner of the booth, seemingly too busy watching them eat to fill their plates themselves. Once the kids had had their first portions, they started to talk about the small things, no one mentioned Max and Dustin dragging Billy and Steve along, no one mentioned that they had exited the car together, Steve clad in Billy’s jeans and shirt, that fit him a bit too well in some places. Apparently, they all had decided to accept anything they were going to tell them. Since neither Billy, nor Steve mentioned anything, they settled for a few hidden peeks.

In the end it was Hopper, who cleared his throat and grabbed Joyce’s hand under the table. As if it prompted something, Steve felt Billy take his hand as well, tracing a pattern only known to him on the back of his hand. They didn’t talk about what happened, between the interrupted breakfast and Max and Dustin interrupting what could have been so much more promising than just a simple making out session. He shot Billy a quick look and a smile, all they managed before Hopper turned back towards to look around.

‘It is nice to have everyone here for a change. And with that, I mean

all of you. Of course, it is a shame that one of us will have to leave soon,' Hopper threw Billy a look, who just scooped more food into his mouth, displaying a variation of the shit-eating grin Steve knew so well, 'the downside to there being just the two of us, right?'

Billy rolled his eyes at him, prompting Jane to giggle, 'And why are there only the two of you?'

'Because Hop has standards,' Mike, Dustin and Will said with one voice.

'I'm just saying, if we had one more, we could have one on call and the two others would have some time off. Or the other way around, two on call, one off – it'd be like a date night, given that we are in Hawkins and nothing ever happens,' Hopper looks from Billy to Steve to Jane.

'I really don't know what you're getting at,' Jane grinned, 'I'm in most days, anyway.'

'Hop, leave it,' Billy sounded a bit choked up, pushing his eggs around on the plate in front of him, 'we talked about it. We are fine.'

'I'm just saying, it would be easy. Once we find someone compatible with us, they could retrain, or maybe they already have experiences useful to us,' Hopper seemed to be getting at something Steve couldn't follow.

'Wait,' Dustin set down his coffee mug and stared across the table, still chewing on a strip of bacon, 'didn't you say that Steve would be perfect for the job?'

A groan erupted from all corners of the booth, Max shook her head and Mike seemed tempted to facepalm, showing his obvious displeasure. Nancy cleared her throat more than notably, it seemed to be a call for calmness. The kids settled down again, everyone busy with their food again.

Until Dustin looked up, his fork slipping from the table and clattering to the floor, 'Are you suggesting Steve quit his job in New York, become a cop and work back here in Hawkins?'

Steve spluttered his drink. A few eyes were focused on him, Billy's included. He couldn't forbear noticing that Billy seemed almost hopeful. He took Billy's hand under the table and squeezed it, smiling at him.

'This is a bit early to say that, Dustin,' he sighed, 'I mean, have we even addressed this?'

He looked around, taking in the encouraging looks from Joyce and Will. The party still stared at him, looks shifting between him and Billy.

'Okay, guys, I know I haven't been here for a long time. Maybe long enough to forget a few things, and make a few things feel worse than they were. Right now, I feel like running away,' he could feel Billy's hand tighten around his own, 'but I don't want to run anymore. I want to find my place to stay and be happy.'

'What kind of place are you looking for?' Jane leaned over the table.

'Well, a place where I feel home. Where I have people who care about me, where I know that I will have someone to confide in.'

'You're describing Hawkins,' Mike chipped in, 'come on, Steve, we all are your friends. We know you, in a way. And when we met you again, you looked horrible.'

'He looked horrible before leaving yesterday, as well,' Dustin shrugged.

'Traitor,' Steve mumbled into his cup.

A hand sneaked around his waist. Billy leaned closer, his lips almost brushing his ears.

'I think we should get out of here and find a place to talk, don't you agree?' his voice sounded equally worried and promising, Steve nodded and cleared his throat.

'I know you mean well. But I will need a moment to digest all this.'

He got up and left with a smile around and a last serving of Joyce's

reassuring looks. Billy followed him outside and towards his car. He had grabbed a sandwich from one of the plates on the table inside and chewed on it as he sat down next to Steve.

‘Where do we start?’ he seemed to be at a loss for words.

Steve took his hand, if only to have something to have anything to hold onto, ‘Billy – I hope I can be honest. I felt good last night. I felt good ten years ago. You made me feel something during moments when I didn’t feel anything else. You posed a safe haven for me when the world seemed to crumble around me. What I’m trying to say I that...I could imagine something with you.’

‘Who’s going soft now?’ Billy’s voice was huskier than he maybe would have liked, judging by the way he tried to clear his throat, ‘I just want you to know that I’ve changed. You might not trust me entirely, but you trust the kids, and you have seen that they accept me. Kind of. I spent the last ten years wondering what happened that night, if I did something wrong, why you just left...and after I learned that your parents died that night, I wanted to find out where you were, how you did, if I could help you.’

‘You did.’

‘Too late. Ten years too late,’ Billy huffed out and raked his fingers through his hair.

‘Is that really bothering you that much?’ Steve turned in his seat to face him, ‘Because I can assure you, you haven’t been too late. I am still very much alive, and at the moment I am here in Hawkins, with you. And I haven’t regretted it to be here. Yes, Tommy is a fucking pain in the ass, Carol’s voice still could get glasses to burst – but I’m here with you, not them, right?’

‘I’m still not sure I know why,’ Billy mumbled, hiding his face behind the hands massaging his temples, ‘Why are you here with me?’

Steve rolled his eyes at him, wanted to tell him that he had told him already, that he could imagine something with Billy, more than a hook-up, something that lasted longer. That he longed for something more than just the occasional fling. He wanted to tell him that he

couldn't say it out loud, but even that proved to be impossible.

All he could do, was look at Billy and take in the pain and worry in his eyes. There were no words he could say as long as he couldn't even think of them.

Instead, he tried to look into Billy's mind. His eyes were blue enough to resemble a stormy sea. There was a hint of the same forlornness in his eyes, a trace of what he feared to show himself.

'I'll come back,' he tried, 'I will need to return to New York, we both know that. It is not as easy as the kids would like it to be. I will have to pack and hand in my two weeks' notice before I can even think about leaving again.'

'Again?' Billy lifted his head, 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that they are right. I hate my life in New York, it punishes me for something I couldn't be made responsible for, someone told me that, recently. It is a lonely life, with most of my friends far away from me. I stayed away for so long, I almost forgot everything I have back here. I have the kids, Joyce and Hopper, and I have you. Don't I?'

Billy's answer came quick and clearly. This time, he was the one to heave himself over the centre console, into Steve's lap. His lips attacked Steve's, bruising him with the kisses he pressed to them.

'Yes, you have me,' he assured Steve, 'you have me and I won't allow you ever letting go again.'

Steve knew he panted, Billy shuddered under the hot air hitting his skin. Billy Hargrove was his to take, his to take care of; his.

They kissed, hardly breathing in between, open-mouthed and needy, both willing to give more than the other needed as assurance. It felt nice, Steve realized; in a way, Billy's broad frame felt familiar. He allowed himself to scoot deeper in his seat, pressing the other closer to him. A sound escaped Billy's mouth, squeezing past their lips and lingering in the car.

'Steve, I'm beginning to need to get rid of a problem,' Billy rasped out

and shifted in Steve's lap, pressing into him just a tad too hard, 'honestly, Harrington – you drive me crazy.'

There was a knock on the window, prompting them to jump apart. Trying to, at least, Billy hit the horn with his lower back in the process, Hopper shook his head at the sound. He and Dustin stood outside of the car, both seemingly vibrating on the spot.

'Did you discuss it? Have you finally decided that you're better off together?' Dustin seemed close to climbing through the car window as he grinned down at them, ignoring the position they were in, 'You're still gross, by the way.'